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Constructing identities in the West Branch landscape: Herbert Hoover's life and legacy as a common man, 1935-1992

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CONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES IN THE WEST BRANCH LANDSCAPE: HERBERT
HOOVER'S LIFE AND LEGACY AS A COMMON MAN, 1935-1992

An Abstract of a Thesis
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Ryan Lucas Wurtz
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July 2017

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the development of the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum, and the town of West Branch's memorialization of Herbert Hoover. The memorialization process of Herbert Hoover's life began with the purchase of his childhood home by his wife, Lou Henry, and son, Allan Hoover in 1935. Backed by the town of West Branch, where the birth site was located, the memorial consisted of the home that Hoover lived in as a child. The Birthplace Society, comprised of leading West Branch community members, expanded the grounds and restored Hoover's father's blacksmith shop in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s. In 1957, unhappy with his relationship with the Hoover Institute at Stanford University, Hoover proposed that a small library be built to house some of his presidential memorabilia in West Branch on the same grounds. Dedicated in 1962, the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum became the fourth institution in the National Archives and Records Administration's (NARA) presidential library system. Then in 1965, the grounds, blacksmith's shop, and birthplace cottage were added to the National Register of Historic Places administered by the National Park Service (NPS). The belated construction of the presidential library, its combination with the birthplace and grounds, and its connection to the community creates a portrayal of Hoover that is different from other presidents in other presidential libraries.

The national archives and park service interpreted Hoover's life differently. Although Hoover's national legacy remained tied to the Great Depression, both NARA and NPS sought to distance Hoover from his failures and focused their story on his

successful humanitarian efforts. The NPS told of Hoover's childhood years in Iowa, and credited his humble, small-town upbringing for his later successes. That narrative had been crafted by the Birthplace Society in West Branch and adopted by the NPS. Community leaders in West Branch used their connection to Hoover to put their small Iowa town on the map in a significant way. Hoover gave West Branch the opportunity to create a history that would set them apart from other towns in Iowa. West Branch's interpretation of Hoover's childhood spoke as much about their view of him as it did about the way in which they wanted outsiders to view their community. Rather than contradicting this more sympathetic narrative, the national archives and parks service built upon it to emphasize Hoover's accomplishments beyond his presidency. As a result, the memorialization of Hoover in his hometown does not mirror his standing in public memory, but promotes the former president's ideas about conservatism and individualism and West Branch's small-town identity.

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HOOVER'S LIFE AND LEGACY AS A COMMON MAN, 1935-1992

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INTRODUCTION

On June 30, 1941, Franklin Delano Roosevelt stood in front of a small crowd in Hyde Park, NY, ready to dedicate his presidential library to the United States government. “A Nation must believe in three things. It must believe in the past. It must believe in the future. It must, above all, believe in the capacity of its own people so to learn from the past that they can gain in judgement in creating their own futures,” Roosevelt said. “Millions of our citizens. . . will be glad that what we do today makes available to future Americans the story of what we have lived and are living today,” he continued.¹ As Roosevelt gave his final remarks the doors to his presidential library officially opened and a precedent had been set.

Roosevelt intended for these institutions to be repositories for use by the American people. Despite Roosevelt’s intention, not everyone viewed the library as a place of research. Many people felt Roosevelt’s library was simply a way to memorialize himself in the manner he most desired, thereby altering presidential memorialization. Every subsequent President after FDR has constructed and dedicated a presidential library of their own. The tradition was continued by Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower throughout the 1950s.

Herbert Hoover’s presidential library became the fourth one administered by the National Archives in 1962. It has since taken on the task of telling Hoover’s story in a multitude of ways, and has used a variety of narratives to frame his life since the library

¹ Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Presidential library dedication ceremony speech, June 30, 1941.

was dedicated. Today, Hoover remains a fascinating figure in history because his incredible success as a humanitarian has been overshadowed by his failures as President. For that reason, Hoover has been cast aside in public memory despite some historian's best efforts. Elected in 1928, he served one term as President before being defeated by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the 1932 election. With Hoover's defeat, his legacy and reputation appeared to be set in stone, but Hoover earned back a measure of good-will for his relief efforts after WWII.

In 1958, still largely forgotten in the public's memory, Hoover granted his wife and a small group of friends' permission to build a small library in his hometown of West Branch, IA, that would contain some of his memorabilia from his time as President. Because of some unexpected circumstances, this small library in West Branch became Hoover's presidential library. Opened to the public in 1962, Hoover's presidential library marked the beginning of a shift in how presidential libraries were viewed. In 1971, Lyndon Johnson dedicated a massive presidential library, which marked a shift from repository to memorial.

Despite the popularity of presidential libraries, their museum exhibitions have been scrutinized by historians and history enthusiasts alike for simply memorializing former Presidents. Despite FDR's original intent for these libraries as research facilities, they have become tourist attractions because of their museum exhibitions. Presidential libraries have used a mix of memory and history to tell their stories. Historian Susan A. Crane argues, "museums, like memories, 'exist' on several levels . . . Museums exist in the remembered and lived experiences of untold numbers of many generations of visitors,

museum professionals, and readers.” Museums, at least theoretically, represent “an organizational principle for the content of cultural identity.” Museums offer on a certain level a sense of recollection on the part of their visitors. What visitors learn and preserve as memory travels outside of the museum walls and becomes a part of their identity.²

Why do people go to museums in the first place? According to Crane, “We go to museums to learn about ourselves, to witness what has been identified as significant art or history or science, and to come away with a stronger sense of ourselves.”³

Understanding the purpose of these historic sites has been difficult as they lie at the intersection of public memory, history, politics, and identity. Very few historians have written about presidential libraries. The most prominent historian to do so, Benjamin Hufbauer, argued that presidential libraries are a part of “the civil religion” of the United States meant to be sacred places “where pilgrimages can be made to see relics and reconstructions of presidential history, all in order to elevate in the national consciousness presidents who. . . are represented as worthy of patriotic veneration.” Hufbauer’s focus was on a national impact of these institutions. Hufbauer also argued that the role of the President changed since FDR was in office and the presidential library system has reflected this growth in power and “has led to a new kind of presidential commemoration: self-commemoration.” Hufbauer’s main argument against presidential

² Susan A. Crane, *Museums and Memory*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000): 2-3.

³ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

libraries has been that presidential library system, and the museums in particular are “largely celebratory accounts” rather than historically accurate and balanced accounts.⁴

As the theory goes, “out of common memories . . . Americans have forged a common identity.” Another groups of historians have written about museums, historic sites, and presidential libraries as pieces of culture and have sought to understand their influence on cultural identity and the role they play in people’s lives. Historian Timothy Luke argued, “museums today are still important educational institutions . . . they also possess a power to shape collective values and social understandings.” The presidential library invites its visitors to play a part in the story being told and models who they should be after leaving. “Performance has always shaped the American presidency,” wrote Professor Jodi Kanter. Kanter, unlike Luke, looked at presidential libraries as performance pieces and argued that these libraries were not meant to convince visitors that a particular narrative is true, but as an “account deliberately constructed to do particular work in a particular place. . . (that) acts out a particular version of the American story . . . about who the president is and what he does.” Historians that write

⁴ Benjamin Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples: How Memorials and Libraries Shape Public Memory*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 6-8; Benjamin Hufbauer, “Spotlights and Shadows: Presidents and Their Administrations in Presidential Museum Exhibits,” *The Public Historian* 4, no. 28 (2006): 117-118; Richard J. Cox, “America’s Pyramids: Presidents and Their Libraries,” *Government Information Quarterly* 1, no. 19 (2002): 45-75; R. Bruce Craig, “Presidential Libraries and Museums: Opportunities for Genuine Reform,” *The Public Historian* 4, no. 28 (2006): 81-84; Edward T. Linenthal, *The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1-15.

about museums and their influence on culture and identity have used memory as a way of understanding how a cultural identity was formed.⁵

While historians and scholars have debated over the meaning and agendas of museums across the country, in particular presidential libraries, and their role in shaping the identity of the nation and the people who visit them, they have failed to discuss the impact on identity at anything more than a national level. Often calling into question the countries values and identity, these historians have disregarded the location of these institutions. Spread out across the country, presidential libraries span from coast to coast, across several different regions, all with their own local cultures and identities.

West Branch is home to two different historic sites dedicated to Herbert Hoover. The presidential library is administered by the National Archives and Records Administration, while the rest of the grounds is administered by the National Park Service. Each governing body has interpreted their site differently. The national archives has chosen to tell Hoover's story at a national level. The National Park Service told a very local story, one that was created by prominent members of the West Branch

⁵ Jodi Kanter, *Presidential Libraries as Performance*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), 5; Jodi Kanter, "Character-in-Chief: Performing the American Citizen at Two Presidential Libraries," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (2012); Timothy W. Luke, *Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xiii-13; Ari Kelman, *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling over the Memory of Sand Creek*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 3; Jill Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 14-19; *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, ed. Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 1996); Roy Rosenzweig and David P. Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

community prior to the park's dedication. This paper examines the competing narratives used by the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum and the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site to tell Hoover's story at a local level. I have done this for two reasons. One, historians have already looked at the impact of these institutions at a national level. Two, I wanted to highlight the memorialization that was created by the people of the community and the competing ideas of history and heritage present in West Branch. The choice in narratives convey particular messages to visitors about the identity of West Branch. I argue that the memorialization of Hoover within West Branch was actually the construction of the town's identity.

Chapter 1 of this thesis discusses the relationship between the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum and the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site's choice of narratives to tell Hoover's story. Each narrative has been grounded in historical fact. The presidential library grounded its interpretation in history. The museum's interpretation mirrors that of the 1980s historical reinterpretations of Hoover done by scholars, while the story told by the NPS was created by members of the West Branch Community who grounded their interpretation in history, but fused it with heritage to give their town a unique identity.

Chapter 2 provides a narrative of Hoover's life based on his own writings, but also that of scholars to provide an outline of his life. The main portion of the chapter analyzes the historical reinterpretations of Hoover's life done by historians in three distinct time periods: the 1960s, 1980s, and 2000s. Each historical interpretation is part of

a response to the issues of its time, namely some kind of economic depression. These historical reinterpretations of Hoover highlight the agendas behinds historian's narratives.

Chapter 3 analyzes the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library's museum permanent exhibition. By breaking down each individual gallery narrative, the story that the museum wants its visitors to remember becomes clear. The Hoover Galleries seek to distance Hoover from the Great Depression and his failures as President, and recast his legacy by focusing on his multiple humanitarian efforts around the world largely based in the intellectual reinterpretations by the historians of the 1980s.

CHAPTER 1

HERBERT HOOVER AND WEST BRANCH IDENTITY

In 2004, after President George W. Bush's first term in office, Democrats criticized him for being the first President since Herbert Hoover to lose jobs. "They've dug up poor Mr. Hoover again and tried to turn him into the boogeyman of the campaign," said Tim Walch, the former director of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum. The outrage in West Branch extended beyond the presidential library all the way to the Mayor's office. Mike Quinlan, the Mayor of West Branch at the time, stated, "It's really irrelevant to what's happening, and people can't get over it," he continued, "Hoover would have shown more class and never would have bashed a Democrat but it's easy to do that."¹

President Herbert Hoover occupied a desolate place in many Americans' memory as the President who caused the Great Depression, or at the very least, failed to stop it, except in his hometown of West Branch, Iowa. Hoover's hometown has memorialized him in a variety of ways, but chief among them was the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site and Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum. This chapter explains the relationship between presidential libraries and the development of local identities, focusing on the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and National Historic Site in his hometown of West Branch, Iowa. The town of West Branch has claimed Hoover as one of their own homegrown heroes. I argue that the narrative the town used to tell Hoover's

¹ Ryan J. Foley, "Hometown Backers Come to Hoover's Defense," Associated Press, Mar. 28, 2004, accessed April 23, 2017.

story was more of a reflection of the town's identity than the reality of Hoover's actual life.

Presidential libraries are a relatively new topic for historians with very few works published in the field. Ben Hufbauer has written about these institutions most prolifically, often with a very critical eye and drawing religious comparisons. He argued that most presidents simply wanted their libraries to reflect the attractive parts of their administrations in hopes of cementing a place in the nation's "civil religion," a term he described as worship for particular events and people throughout the country's history.² The issue with most of his work, and other historians by extension, was the scope of the writing. Collectively, these historians focused on how presidential libraries have informed identity on a national scale, while ignoring that these institutions are geographically dispersed from coast to coast in every region across the country and have a serious impact in the communities in which they are built.

The creation of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's presidential library marked a shift in the commemoration of America's presidents. Some of the most notable presidential monuments before the Roosevelt Library included the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument, but these structures paid homage to their subjects and did not seek to tell their life stories. As FDR laid out his vision for a new kind of repository for presidential materials a new kind of memorialization had begun, whether intentional or otherwise. As Roosevelt laid out in his dedication speech, his library was meant as a

² Benjamin Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples: How Memorials and Libraries Shape Public Memory*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 1.

place to research and learn about his presidency. However, not everyone saw the library this way; many saw a monument to the president.

According to presidential scholar Duncan Watts, the presidency has been viewed “as the symbol not only of the American federal government in Washington, but of the whole country as well. He is the ‘superstar’ of the American political system.”³ Beginning with FDR, the power of the presidency began to expand, but before his administration the role of the presidency had been much more limited and taken a far less active role in American’s lives with some exceptions, but for the most part held true until the Herbert Hoover administration’s attempts to combat the Great Depression.

There has been a vast expansion of powers the president possessed since FDR took office, but it was not always intended that way. The U.S. Founding Fathers outlined a series of Presidential powers in Article II of the Constitution. They had originally intended for the office to stand as a symbol of national unity while Congress would be the supreme power.⁴ After the Great Depression and World War II, the presidency would never be the same.⁵ As the power of the President expanded, Roosevelt believed it was vital that the people of the nation could see the inner workings of their government, which ultimately led to his proposal for a presidential library to serve as a repository for his own papers.

³ Duncan Watts, *The American Presidency*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵ Benjamin Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples*, 3.

On April 12, 1945, as World War II neared its end, President Roosevelt died. He was laid to rest on the grounds of his presidential library and essentially his legacy became the responsibility of the federal government for care and display. Roosevelt's successor, Harry Truman, followed suit and built a presidential library of his own after his presidency. This cycle has continued; each subsequent president has erected a library of his own, with Barack Obama set to open his presidential library in Chicago in the near future. As presidential powers expanded, so did presidential commemoration. While commemoration practices expanded, one question that remained unanswered was what value presidential libraries had to the public.

The core idea of these libraries was their tendency to commemorate their subjects instead of challenging their viewers' preconceived notions of who these men were and evaluating their actions. Since Franklin D. Roosevelt, the presidency had become the center of American politics and the public's view of the office radically changed, becoming more critical than celebratory. Depicted in countless films and television shows, the American public has been subjected to a variety of presidential depictions that communications studies scholar Shawn Parry-Giles argues "demarcates the cultural and ideological meaning of the presidency." Presidential libraries, in many ways, act in the same manner as a fictional representation of the presidency. These fictitious portrayals offered a "presidentiality" or a meaning to the presidency and the men that have held the office previously grounded in ideological rhetoric rather than the reality of their actions. The connection between presidentiality and presidential libraries lies in their

responsiveness to collective memory and the context of their production, explaining “the national community by offering a vision of this vital office.”⁶

Presidential libraries are inherently political institutions whether they were intended that way or not. These institutions have not been without controversy, and have remained a point of political contention particularly in regards to how they are funded. Traditionally the ex-president has been tasked with fundraising money to build the library, which has been a source of controversy. There have been four attempts to impose legislation that would require quarterly donation reports from presidential libraries. Not necessarily designed to govern who can donate, the enormous costs of presidential libraries highlighted the need to spotlight donors who may be “snuggling up to future ex-presidents.”⁷

In 1941, Franklin Roosevelt’s presidential library had been built for roughly \$400,000. Ever since, the rising cost of presidential libraries has been a concern for citizens and lawmakers alike. The newest presidential library, dedicated to George W. Bush, required an incredible \$500 million-dollar endowment just to be built. However, it was recently revealed Barack Obama intended to raise at least \$1 billion to erect and fund his library. All the money for the construction of presidential libraries must be raised privately, but taxpayers end up footing a sizeable portion of the organizations’ operating costs because of their responsibility to house presidential papers and make them available

⁶ Shawn J. Parry-Giles, *The Prime-Time Presidency*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 2.

⁷ Aamer Madhani, “An open book on funding presidential libraries,” *USA Today*, Apr. 9, 2013.

to the public as part of the National Archives and Records Administration. As more presidential libraries were built, Congress enacted the Presidential Libraries Act of 1986, requiring that the size of presidential endowments directly coincided with the size of the facility and that a portion of the endowments are used to offset maintenance costs.⁸ As the profile of the office and presidential power increased, the physical size of presidential libraries also grew. Today, the libraries range in size from 47,000 square feet all the way up to just over 134,000 square feet.

Even with the sizeable endowments required to build and operate these structures, taxpayers have still incurred some of the costs. After the Presidential Libraries Act of 1955 established the NARA run presidential library system, new legislation with the Presidential Records Act of 1978 made presidential holdings received after 1981 public property. As presidential libraries grew, so did their expenses. As a result, the Presidential Libraries Act of 1986 was passed. The legislation required private endowments in relation to the size of each presidential library.⁹ Even with a required endowment some of the burden to fund these facilities fell to the taxpayers. As of 2013, taxpayers paid nearly \$68 million to support NARA in housing presidential library holdings, which equated to roughly twenty-one cents per individual.¹⁰ This amount hardly makes a dent in anyone's paycheck, but the idea that the public should pay for the operation these libraries and their services divided, and continues to divide, many on the

⁸ Presidential Libraries Act of 1986, 99 U.S.C. 323, H.R. 1349 (1986).

⁹ National Archives, "Presidential Libraries: Laws and Regulations," *National Archives*, accessed on May 1, 2017, www.archives.gov.

¹⁰ Dahlehn Glanton, "Taxes go to operation of presidential libraries," *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 8, 2014, accessed on April 6, 2017, www.chicagotribune.com.

issue. Hufbauer called these institutions “museums of spin” that aimed to shape public opinion, which explained the resistance by some taxpayers.

According to Susan Donius, the Director of the National Archives and Records Administration’s Office of Presidential Libraries, these institutions provided people with “access to democracy.” Donius also stated, “We have a curatorial staff that oversees the exhibits, but the story is the presidents to tell. It emphasizes the points he wants to make about his four or eight years in office.”¹¹ Donius acknowledged the lack of historical interpretation in favor of whatever meaning the president wanted to convey about his time in office, which echoed Hufbauer’s claim. She implied the museum portion of these libraries was largely created without attention to accurate history to craft a legacy most desirable to their subject.

Located in only 10 different states, presidential libraries called a diverse array of places home. These institutions represent their city and region as much as the president’s name on the building. American identities originated in places across the country where people settled and assumed historic burdens. As the United States expanded, the formation of regions around race and ethnicity, geography, and economic situation quickly followed, solidifying after the Civil War into the Northeast, South, Midwest, and Far West. Rooted in the shared pasts of particular places, regionalism in the early twentieth century merged with American nationalism as “a form of identity that promises to transcend ethnic boundaries, to unite people across generations.”¹²

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Edward L. Ayers and Peter S. Onuf, introduction to *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 1-3.

Nevertheless, regional identity is fluid. Typically, major national events have caused major reconsiderations of some of the nation's most fundamental values.¹³ The word region implied the lens through which each particular area of the country "is seen, understood, assigned meaning, and given identity according to some defining experience or set of experiences located deep in the past, a crucial phase or moment at which the region was broken away, stamped for life, and set on its separate cultural course within the national collective, having achieved an identity that it is believed to maintain with greater or lesser dilution to the present day." Interestingly, however, the Midwest lacked an evident history or a defining historical moment, such as the South had in secession and Civil War and the West had in expansion and conquest. In the absence of a singular event, the people of the Midwest created a history that utilized the places most prevalent to their lives, their identity began "not in a spot in the past but in the spot on which they stand."¹⁴ Because Midwesterners have struggled to unite behind one common history, they created their own histories based on the events and people that connected them to a larger national identity.

Personages have often been used to define and elevate local surroundings and to some extent their region. In the case of the Midwest, people such as John Wayne, Henry Ford, or even Oprah Winfrey are used for this purpose. For West Branch, Iowa, Herbert Hoover fit that mold. The only person from Iowa to have ascended to the presidency,

¹³ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 127.

¹⁴ Kent C. Ryden, "Writing the Midwest: History, Literature, and Regional Identity," *The Geographical Review* 89, No. 4 (Oct. 1999), 513.

Hoover was memorialized in his hometown with the building of his presidential library and historic park. Presidential libraries have been designed as deliberate attempts to memorialize former presidents usually initiated by the former president himself. Herbert Hoover's library remained an exception because his son, Allan, served as the chief consultant on the project. Hoover was passively involved in the project, but he remained in his New York City apartment until the dedication in 1962. Outside of moving his presidential materials from Stanford University, Hoover offered little consult about the buildings purpose or structure, which allowed his close friends and family members to decide how to memorialize him.

Although Hoover's presidential library was dedicated in 1962, his memorialization in West Branch had been underway for nearly three decades. Hoover's memorialization in West Branch had its beginnings in 1923 when a small group of people from around the state met in West Branch, a town of 688 in 1920, and requested permission to designate a section of highway to be named after the Secretary of Commerce.¹⁵ The stretch of highway was supposed to run just over forty miles and would connect Iowa City and West Branch to surrounding towns. After several months, the Iowa State Highway Commission granted approval to the group's request and the Herbert Hoover Highway became reality.¹⁶

¹⁵ "Census of Population and Housing," *Census.gov*, accessed on May 1, 2017. www.census.gov.

¹⁶ NPS, "Herbert Hoover National Historic Site: Directions & Transportation," *National Park Service*, accessed on April 4, 2017; Frank T. Nye Jr., *Doors of Opportunity: The Life and Legacy of Herbert Hoover*, (West Branch: Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Association, 1988), 60-62

After the construction of the Herbert Hoover Highway, his childhood home was purchased for restoration by his wife, Lou Henry. The restoration of Hoover's home and grounds were part of an effort by his family. Hoover gave his input along the way, but his son, Allan, and wife, former First Lady Lou Henry, arranged the purchase of his father's childhood home in 1935 with the intent to restore it to its original state.¹⁷ The purchase and planned restoration of Hoover's childhood home led to the creation of the Hoover Birthplace Society at the request of Lou Henry.¹⁸ This organization was to assume control of the cottage after its restoration and would see to the care and maintenance of the facility moving forward much like FDR's initial library in 1941. Officially created on April 18, 1939, the Herbert Hoover Birthplace Society was up and running and Hoover's first memorialization in West Branch had been completed.¹⁹

After the creation of the Birthplace Society, the grounds around the cottage were modified with the planting of trees, shrubs, and flowers. The grounds around the house were landscaped and a wooden bridge was installed across the Wapsinonoc Creek, which ran next to the cottage, along with a picnic table for visitors. The initial landscaping was completed in 1939 and the cottage and grounds remained the same until 1948 when the Birthplace Society acquired twenty-five additional acres of land to be landscaped and interpreted. The acquisition of this additional land sparked the first conversation about building a library on the grounds. In addition, society members discussed reconstructing

¹⁷ Frank T. Nye Jr., *Doors of Opportunity: The Life and Legacy of Herbert Hoover*, (West Branch: Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Association, 1988), 140-144.

¹⁸ Lou Henry Hoover, letter to Harrison Spangler, June 28, 1938, Box 15, Post Presidential Subject: Birthplace, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum Archive.

¹⁹ NPS, "Hoover Cottage," *National Park Service*, July 28, 2006, www.nps.gov.

Jesse Hoover's Blacksmith Shop. The Birthplace Society did much of the planning for these new additions and Hoover mainly served in an advisory role approving the additions.²⁰



Figure 1: The Hoover Cottage as it stands today. (Image Courtesy of the National Park Service)

On August 30, 1951, Hoover received the Iowa Award, which was given to the state's highest citizen in recognition of "outstanding service of Iowans in the fields of medicine, law, religion, social welfare, education, agriculture, industry, government, and other public service."²¹ The thirty pound plaque became important for the park after Hoover decided to house it in West Branch so "the people can see that the fellow who was born there came to a good end." Because of his decision, the Birthplace Society

²⁰ NPS, "Hoover Cottage: Construction, Maintenance, & Landscaping, 1939-1970," *National Park Service*, July 28, 2006, www.nps.gov.

²¹ State of Iowa, "Iowa Profile: The Iowa Award," *State of Iowa*, accessed April 11, 2017, <http://publications.iowa.gov/135/1/profile/8-16.html>.

constructed a gateway to the cottage yard that housed the large plaque. More importantly, the award and the park were dedicated to the State of Iowa on June 30, 1952 and officially became the Herbert Hoover Birthplace Park.²²

After the dedication of the park, the Birthplace Society turned their attention to the reconstruction of Jesse Hoover's Blacksmith Shop. Hoover, once again, had little direct influence on the project as most correspondences occurred between the Birthplace Society and Hoover's son, Allan, who acted as the lead consultant on the renovation. The reasons behind the reconstructed shop were never stated outright, but they were a part of the Birthplace Societies long-term plan drawn up in 1948. Construction on the shop was completed and the structure was dedicated in June 1957.²³



Figure 2: Jesse Hoover's recreated Blacksmith Shop (Image courtesy of the National Park Service)

²² NPS, "Hoover Cottage: Construction, Maintenance, & Landscaping, 1939-1970."

²³ Ibid., accessed April 11, 2017.

After the park and blacksmith shop were both dedicated Hoover proposed to a friend, Neil MacNeil, the need for a small library and museum near the grounds to house some of the former president's memorabilia. MacNeil corresponded with Bill Anderson, the President of the Birthplace Society, about the possible construction of the building. The two men exchanged multiple letters, but interestingly Hoover had intended the original structure to be small in scale since most of his papers and artifacts had been given to the Hoover Institution at Stanford University after he left office. Hoover founded the Hoover Institution in 1919 as a think-tank and held Hoover's papers from his time as both the Secretary of Commerce and the president.²⁴

With the passage of the Presidential Libraries Act of 1955, a federally run presidential library was possible for Hoover. The Act "encouraged other Presidents to donate their historical materials to the government and ensured the preservation of Presidential papers and their availability to the American people."²⁵ In a May 21, 1958, correspondence to Anderson, MacNeil wrote that Hoover had discussed with him the proposed museum and his plans to make it his official presidential library. MacNeil wrote in his letter, "The project is much more ambitious than I had thought. In fact, it means that this will be the real presidential library. . . He stressed that it should be simple . . . so

²⁴ Stanford University, "Hoover Institution: Library & Archives History," *Hoover Institution*, accessed April 11, 2017, www.hoover.org.

²⁵ National Archives, "Presidential Libraries Act of 1955," NARA, accessed on April 30, 2017.

it would not overshadow the cottage.”²⁶ The cause of Hoover’s sudden change of heart remained out of the public eye, but his relationship with the Hoover Institution had been strained for years. In the early 1950s, Hoover was increasingly at odds with the institution’s administrator and employees who he felt had left-leaning tendencies. The final straw for Hoover occurred when the institution selected a new director that he did not support.²⁷ Because of these philosophical differences Hoover decided to move most of his materials to the new library in his hometown.

As the plan for the presidential library became a reality Hoover remained relatively distant from the project and allowed his son Allan and members of the newly-created Herbert Hoover Foundation, Inc. to work out many of the details.²⁸ The Herbert Hoover Foundation, Inc. allowed for a wider, national reach to garner financial support for the library and museum. To streamline their efforts, the Foundation and Birthplace Society merged into a single entity.²⁹

Construction began in 1959 and Hoover’s presidential library officially opened its doors on August 10, 1962, his eighty-eighth birthday. The library’s dedication attracted a

²⁶ Neil MacNeil, letter to Bill Anderson, May 21, 1958, Bill Anderson Papers 1958-1959: correspondence among Foundation trustees, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum Archive.

²⁷ George Nash, *Herbert Hoover and Stanford University*, (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1988), 126-166; Frank T. Nye Jr., *Doors of Opportunity: The Life and Legacy of Herbert Hoover*, (West Branch: Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Association, Inc., 1988), 287-289.

²⁸ Wm. B. Anderson Papers, Aug. 1954-Dec. 1955, Folder: Herbert Hoover Birthplace Observance Committee correspondence with Allan Hoover, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum Archives.

²⁹ NPS, “Long-Range Interpretive Plan (PDF file),” National Park Service, Jan. 2008, pg. 2.

large crowd to hear Hoover speak and partake in the day's festivities. Lost in that day's newspaper headlines was the work done by the Foundation and Birthplace Society that made the entire day possible. Hoover's name may have been the one on the side of the building, but the library and museum was as much a reflection of what his family and friends believed was his legacy as what Hoover thought.

The ability to claim a former President as their own transformed the town of West Branch into a Hoover shrine cemented by the restoration of the cottage, blacksmith shop, and construction of the presidential library. Even though Hoover left West Branch at an early age, and only returned a handful of times after his presidency, that did not stop West Branch from claiming him as a native son. Three years after the presidential library dedication, the cottage, blacksmith shop and grounds were deemed national historic sites on August 12, 1965, and added to the National Register of Historic Places the following year, which signified the areas importance to American history.³⁰ With the new national historic status of the grounds, the National Park Service assumed control and has administered and cared for them since.

³⁰ NPS, "Herbert Hoover National Historic Site: Landscape & Buildings," *National Park Service*, accessed April 13, 2017, www.nps.gov.

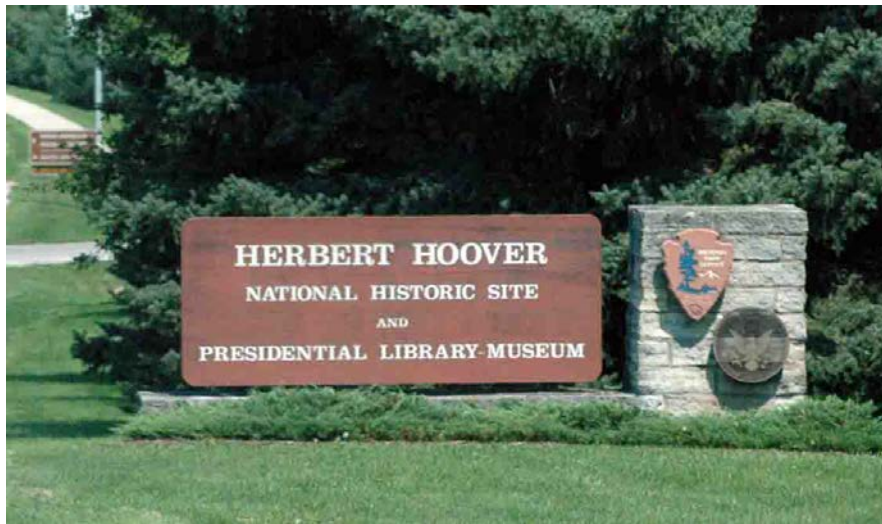


Figure 3: Sign for both historic sites upon entering West Branch (Image courtesy of KWWL)

The grounds and park became nationally recognized memorials to Herbert Hoover, but beyond the efforts of the NPS, the town of West Branch continued to create new ways to celebrate the former president. Hoover Fest, a town-wide celebration, began after the library reopened following a 1992 renovation. The festival has been held every year since during the first week of August. One of the leading, and most interesting, attractions has been the annual Hoover-Ball tournament, which still occurs today. The game was created as a way for Hoover to stay fit while in office. Hoover-Ball consisted of a six-pound medicine ball that was thrown over an eight-foot net. The game was played on what resembled a tennis court and contained many of the same rules. At 7 a.m. every day, except for Sundays, Hoover and others in his administration played for exactly thirty minutes on the south lawn of the White House. The game became so popular at the

White House that Hoover and the men he played with were dubbed the “Medicine Ball Cabinet.”³¹



Figure 4: Hoover and the Medicine Ball Cabinet in 1933 (image courtesy of the National Archives)

Herbert Hoover has been, and continues to be, an important part of the West Branch community identity, but the National Park Service has offered its own interpretation of Hoover’s legacy. According to their website, the “parks historic structures, like the Birthplace Cottage, the Blacksmith Shop. . . symbolize American Ideals as Herbert Hoover saw them and lived them.” The NPS characterized this legacy as very humble and simplistic and by default painted Hoover in the same manner. The narrative that the NPS crafted explicitly connected Hoover’s childhood to his life’s

³¹ HHLP, “History of Hoover-Ball,” *National Archives*, accessed on April 10, 2017, www.hoover.archives.gov/info/hooverball.html.

accomplishments, much like the Birthplace Society had previously done.³² Their main goal was to connect Hoover's Iowa roots to his later successes despite the fact he only lived in West Branch until he was nine years old.

The historic site and presidential library used historical facts to craft their narratives, but within their stories lies the conflict between local heritage of the NPS and national history at the presidential library. The distinction between history and heritage is about testability. According to David Lowenthal, "Testable truth is history's chief hallmark," he continued, "Historians' credibility depends on their sources being open to general scrutiny. . . but to be trustworthy a history must conform to evidence accessible to all."³³ There was no doubt Hoover was born and grew up in West Branch in a small cottage along the Wapsinononic Creek. He was raised as a Quaker by his parents, he had two siblings, his father, Jesse Hoover, owned and operated a small blacksmith shop nearby, and Hoover's parents died during his childhood. There remain few other facts that can be proven about Hoover's childhood in West Branch, which raise the question of how much of the NPS site is heritage, and how much is actual history? Additionally, in the absence of any blueprints or drawings the landscape around the library and cottage were recreated to resemble what they may have looked like during Hoover's childhood.

The narrative used by those that created the historic site and presidential library used history, but clearly infused it with a sense of their own heritage that the town of West Branch played a significant role in all of Hoover's accomplishments and crafted the

³² Ibid., accessed April 13, 2017.

³³ David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 120.

towns identity around its most famous citizen. West Branch claimed Hoover as one of its own and wanted to take some responsibility for his life's achievements. This was hardly a testable truth, which meant the town's claim over Hoover had never been more than a declaration of faith in that particular past.³⁴

The grounds and the presidential library are administered by two different federal agencies; the presidential library by the National Archives, and the grounds by the NPS. Each agency interpreted Hoover differently evidenced in their choice of narratives to tell his story. The narrative chosen by NARA within Hoover's presidential library-museum attempted to exonerate Hoover of his failed presidency, and distance him from the Great Depression by emphasizing his humanitarian efforts. Jodi Kanter wrote that presidential libraries tell specific stories in order to achieve certain goals, and Hoover's presidential library attempted to change Hoover's historical legacy using his humanitarian efforts as the catalyst.³⁵ Kanter's claim about presidential libraries could be applied to other historic sites besides presidential libraries, and certainly to Hoover's National Historic Site.

Outside of the presidential library, the rest of the historic site is interpreted and maintained by the NPS. Their interpretation of Hoover said as much about the way West Branch valued him as it did about the importance of his childhood in Iowa. Never stated explicitly, the original narrative chosen by the Birthplace Society, and continued by the

³⁴ Ibid., 121.

³⁵ Jodi Kanter, *Presidential Libraries as Performance: Curating American Character from Herbert Hoover to George W. Bush*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), 5.

NPS, emphasized Hoover's small town, West Branch roots. Under the NPS, the national historic site used history to tell a historic tale, but stitched into it fables immune from analysis or scrutiny.³⁶ For example, Hoover grew up in a small home that, according to the NPS, represented "humble beginnings and potential," while the grounds represented "coming 'full circle' back to early years at West Branch."³⁷ The NPS's interpretation took the Birthplace Cottage and grounds and assigned them meaning as reasons for Hoover's success rather than letting them simply stand on their own. The NPS interpretation was not based in any sort of testable evidence, which made the NPS interpretation immune to criticism.

Most interesting was West Branch's affirmation of Hoover as a citizen of their town first, and a native Iowan second. Herbert Hoover metaphorically put West Branch on the map and has continued to do so long after his death. A brief look at the town's webpage confirms this. The only attractions listed for visitors directly pertained to the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site and presidential library.³⁸ Herbert Hoover became ingrained in the West Branch community landscape with the restoration of his birthplace, and the subsequent construction of his presidential library. The casting of Hoover as the common man from a small town in Iowa signaled the awareness of the towns defining historical experience, but more importantly it situated Hoover into the town's landscape. West Branch's claim to Hoover was not part of a regional past, but "one derived from

³⁶ Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past*, 121.

³⁷ NPS, "Herbert Hoover National Historic Site: Long Range Interpretive Plan," National Park Service, Jan., 2008, www.nps.gov.

³⁸ City of West Branch, "Visitors," www.westbranchiowa.org, accessed April 12, 2017.

ongoing experience rather than from conventionalized historical hearsay. It bespeaks a region whose residents assign meaning to their geography from within, who have few preexisting meanings handed down to them from the past.”³⁹ Because West Branch did not have a unique history of its own, the town crafted one and used Herbert Hoover as the star. The main problem with creating a history around Hoover was the fact he did virtually nothing to impact West Branch during the time he actually lived there. Hoover’s parents died by the time he was ten years old, and moved to Oregon shortly after. Hoover was absent as the town grew and expanded, and never spent more than a day or two in town when he was adult. Claiming Hoover as a native son made a nice claim to fame, but to craft the town’s history around a man who barely lived there seemed like a town looking for significance.

Herbert Hoover has been claimed by West Branch at a very local level, and to a smaller degree Iowa. What about the rest of the country? The two historic sites in West Branch, the birthplace and presidential library, told the story of Hoover’s humble beginnings and later successes in life. Outside of Hoover’s commemoration in West Branch with his presidential library and birthplace cottage, the town of West Branch found other ways to remember him. The town celebrated Hoover’s birthday annually while the former President was alive, and continues to do so today long after his death, even though his birthday today has combined with the festivities of the town’s annual Hoover Fest celebration.⁴⁰ The history created here was targeted for a very local audience

³⁹ Ryden, “Writing the Midwest,” 519-520.

⁴⁰ George E. Sokolsky, “Herbert Hoover At Age Of 80,” Ottumwa Daily Courier, August 9, 1954, www.newspaperarchive.com; “Wreaths Laid on Graves of Mr. and Mrs.

and served as more of a commemoration for Hoover than anything else, but it remained a tourist attraction all the same.

Visitors continue to visit Hoover's historic site from across the country and their reactions to the site have been mostly positive and bordered on surprise at what they discovered in such a small community. To outsiders, the Midwest has often been considered empty and flat with little historical significance. Kent Ryden, a cultural geography historian, wrote that visitors to the Midwest "are so unimpressed that they insist on seeing flatness in a landscape that is really quite rumpled . . . they witness nothing at all." To those outside of the region, the Midwest provided little national significance, and the identity of its occupants was tied to the flat, perceived nature of the land. The landscape of the Midwest contained its culture. The cultural evidence inscribed in the landscape hinted not at a unified Midwest, but a collection of smaller places defined by the people that lived there. From the outside, the Midwest seemed like one large region that possessed a uniform history. However, instead of one large region, Midwest history should be considered on a place-by-place basis.⁴¹

Visitors to West Branch have been surprised and mostly delighted by the history they found there. Whether they were surprised there was history there at all cannot be said, but visitors unknowingly acknowledged the heritage of West Branch. Mostly absent from library and historic site reviews was the mention of Iowa. Instead, Iowa had been

Hoover," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, August 10, 1965, www.newspaperarchive.com; Donna Lee Olson, "Play celebrates Lou Henry Hoover's passion for life," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, August 7, 1988, www.newspaperarchive.com.

⁴¹ Ryden, "Writing the Midwest," 522.

replaced by the small-town of West Branch, which harkened back to Midwesterners creation of history at a local level. A man from Salem, VA reviewed the sites and was impressed “to see how he (Hoover) grew up and what he became. . . His small town is well preserved.”⁴² The man’s review illustrated the nature of Midwestern history. He referred to West Branch as Hoover’s small town. Iowa no longer had claim to Hoover, but instead he belonged to West Branch, or more aptly West Branch belonged to him, and their portrayal of Hoover spoke highly of the town. In the same manner that West Branch allowed Hoover’s identity to become their own the people that visited these historic sites allowed West Branch’s heritage to inform their view of Hoover.

The re-creation of Hoover’s birthplace and some of the buildings that surrounded it was initiated and mostly carried out by Lou Henry, close friends, or citizens of West Branch. Hoover seemed content letting things operate this way as he served as more of a consultant further evidenced by the fact that Hoover only visited his hometown a handful of times after his presidency for birthday celebrations rather than to aid in his own memorialization. With Hoover’s limited involvement in the project, family and friends were allowed to craft a local legacy for Hoover in whatever way they wanted. They dispensed of the reality that Hoover’s presidency crippled his national legacy and crafted a legacy that emphasized his humble small-town beginning. His friends dismissed the Great Depression and focused on his accomplishments. The memorialization in West Branch was, and continues to be, paradoxical. His friends and family used the fact that he

⁴² “Have to visit!” review on HH National Historic Site TripAdvisor page, modified Nov. 2016, www.tripadvisor.com.

was president to give the Hoover historic sites, and his hometown, credibility while they ignored the outcome of his presidency.

In the timeline of West Branch, which has been incorporated since 1875, there seemed to be little history before Hoover and little new history since. Instead, West Branch has clung to the fact that Hoover lived there for nine years as a child. Hoover wrote about his time in Iowa quite extensively, but talked mostly about his love for the outdoors, fishing in the Wapsinononic Creek, doing chores for his father, and his Quaker upbringing.⁴³ Hoover never credited Iowa for his success, but rather wrote fondly about it as an adult. Ironically, even the museum's current permanent exhibition spent more time on Hoover's childhood in Oregon than it did on Iowa. The narratives used by the NPS historic site and presidential library complemented each other well despite the fact they were created separately. Each narrative sought to combat the national perception of Hoover and stripped him away from the Great Depression. The narratives that were crafted firmly placed Hoover's accomplishments on a much more personal and local level. The historic sites used Hoover as a shining example of what can happen if a person simply worked hard.

Every story that has a beginning, must have an end. Located on the West side of the library, on a hill overlooking the park, Herbert Hoover's body was buried along with Lou Henry's. The burial site possessed a simple design much like the rest of the park and presidential library. Two white marble ledger stones were overlooked by the American

⁴³ Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: Years of Adventure, 1874-1920*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1951), 1-9.

flag. Beyond the waving flag, “on the horizon at the end of the two rows of trees, is a direct view of the white, wood-frame cottage where Herbert Hoover was born.”⁴⁴ Hoover was buried overlooking his childhood home, but beyond his home he overlooked the town of West Branch. The burial site returned Hoover to West Branch where he will remain.



Figure 5: Herbert and Lou Henry Gravesites (Image courtesy of National Park Service)

The restored structures at West Branch were identified by the NPS as resources for memorialization. Each served as more of a symbol than an actual structure. For example, the Birthplace Cottage symbolized the ideas of family, home, simplicity, and humble beginnings. Furthermore, the NPS identified the presidential library-museum as a symbol for legacy and accomplishment. With every possible structure on the grounds

⁴⁴ NPS, “Gravesite,” *National Park Service*, accessed April 13, 2017, www.nps.gov.

assigned a meaning, the site inherently possessed the biases of those that originally designed and built it. Acknowledged in the NPS's interpretive plan:

The landscape design and historic furnishings are a deliberate effort to commemorate and celebrate Herbert Hoover's accomplishments and ideals, rather than an attempt to fully recreate the setting of his youth," and in addition, "the historic landscape, the gravesite, the statue of Isis, and the Presidential Library and Museum connect Herbert Hoover's early childhood to his later accomplishments."⁴⁵

Moving forward the NPS and the NARA run library-museum have looked to develop a closer working relationship to ensure the two sites served as complements to one another. In addition, the NPS hoped to create a collaborative orientation exhibit at both the presidential library and the NPS visitor center that would provide recommendations to visitors on how to best spend their time. The NPS also encouraged West Branch to interpret the town's "prospering spirit" towards the end of the 19th century to fit more in line with the Hoover historic sites.⁴⁶ The interpretive plan for the historic sites sought to create an even better experience for visitors, but it also sought to implement Hoover into the community even more than he already had been.

The Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, NPS Historic Site, and town of West Branch created an identity around the former president. The town has told Hoover's story in a multitude of ways that spoke to his importance, but more importantly spoke of the town's importance to Hoover. The choice of narratives informed the town's view of itself, but also informed any visitors of the town's significance. The narratives presented in

⁴⁵ NPS, "Long Range Interpretive Plan (PDF)," pg. 8-9.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 44.

West Branch matter far more than most visitors have probably ever considered as they actively sought to shape visitor's perceptions of Hoover and the town he hailed from.

The Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and National Historic Site each used different narratives to tell their stories, but each story was meant to commemorate the former president. The National Historic Site looked to reconnect Hoover to his Iowa childhood. The site served as a memorial to Hoover and his accomplishments, but most importantly sought to take a large measure of responsibility for them. The presidential library chose to tell a story focused on Hoover's humanitarian efforts. The two sites different narratives complimented each other with the Historic Site focused on his childhood and the presidential library focused on his political and adult life that combined to form a full depiction of his life and accomplishments.

The stories told at these two sites complement one another, but how are visitors engaging with the two sites? The distinction between which agency runs each site is never stated overtly which has left visitors under the impression that the library and historic site are meant to be viewed as part of the same story even though they were never designed that way. Visitor reviews reflected the way in which people viewed the site, as well as, Hoover's place in history. Many visitors seemed surprised to find a presidential library on their travels across the state. Interestingly, the presidential library or Hoover Historic Site never seemed to be traveler's main destinations, but rather a detour to get out of the car. One reviewer wrote that he and his family "stumbled upon this presidential

library during a road trip to the Iowa State Fair.”⁴⁷ The sense of surprise that a presidential library was in such a small-town was evident throughout visitor reviews.

Reviews for each of the sites differed quite drastically, but not in terms of critical analysis of the information presented, but rather in how the information was received. Reviews for the presidential library reflected the libraries attempt to paint Hoover in a new light and counteract the national memory of him. One reviewer wrote, “I was impressed by the view presented of Herbert Hoover. He was much more of a scholar, geologist, and humanitarian than his perceived reputation. His economic misfortunes during his term may have unfortunately overshadowed his achievements.”⁴⁸ Another reviewer echoed that same sentiment when he wrote, “While on a road trip . . . I happened upon the small town of West Branch and Herbert Hoover's Presidential Library. At first, I was not going to stop. Glad I did! I learned more about this American historical figure than any history teacher ever taught me in school . . . I gained a new appreciation for the challenges faced by Hoover during his presidential term.”⁴⁹ People have interacted with the presidential library just as intended.

Visitor interaction with the Hoover National Historic Site has been different. The site offered visitors a far more immersive experience evidenced by their reviews. “This site gives a great overview of how Hoover grew up, even though he only lived here in his

⁴⁷ Brian W., “Eye Opening and Educational,” review on HHLTP TripAdvisor reviews page, posted October 7, 2016.

⁴⁸ “Out in the middle of nowhere, but that is part of the charm...,” review of HHLTP TripAdvisor page, posted September 9, 2016.

⁴⁹ Forrest H. Brown, “Learn What We Were Never Taught!,” review on HHLTP TripAdvisor page, posted Sep. 9, 2016.

early years . . . This little town and site is a very believable start to such a career,” wrote a reviewer from Kentucky.⁵⁰ Visitors spoke of the interesting history on the site and how it was “interesting to see and to feel what it was like during President Hoover’s time!”⁵¹ The historic site offered local history to the visitors, instead of the national history presented by the presidential library.

The presidential library and historic site used their own narratives to tell a portion of Hoover’s story. Visitors grappled with those two stories differently. The presidential library challenged the public’s national memory with the story it told. Many presidential library visitors walked away with a new memory of Hoover, evidenced by an Ohio man’s review where he wrote, “My preconceived notion of Hoover was that he was responsible for the Great Depression, but I came away from this visit with great appreciation for his life and humanitarian works.”⁵² The man’s review was exactly what the museum intended for its visitors: to reshape him in the minds of the public. The historic site, on the other hand, told Hoover’s local story. Unlike the presidential library, the historic site tried to use his small-town roots as a reason for his success. The simplicity of the site helped to tell the sites’ story. Visitors seemed surprised that a U.S. President hailed from such simple beginnings. A visitor from New York wrote, “You get to see his childhood home and get a true sense of his humble beginnings. At the same time you come away

⁵⁰ Daniel F., “What a great little town and preserved historical area,” review on Hoover National Historic Site TripAdvisor page, posted Nov. 27, 2016.

⁵¹ “A glimpse into the past!,” review on Hoover National Historic Site TripAdvisor page, posted Nov. 15, 2016.

⁵² Chris W., “Outstanding Presidential Library,” review on HHLTP TripAdvisor page, posted Sep. 6, 2016.

with an appreciation for the fact that in this country anyone can become president.”⁵³

Other reviewers commented on the simplicity and beauty of the site, but visitors were unaware that the historic site consisted of little history, but rather displayed the heritage of West Branch.

While each site told a different story they both ultimately failed to mention the historical outcome of his presidency: it failed. Rather, they both simply used the fact that Hoover was a president to justify their stories, whether it was the story of West Branch heritage used by the NPS, or Hoover’s humanitarian efforts told by the National Archives. Ultimately, the presidency was a tool that gave the presidential library and the other historic site legitimacy in the eyes of their creators as well as their visitors. Furthermore, historic sites such as these have used the prestige and admiration of the men who have occupied the Oval Office to spin history to their advantage. Presidential libraries and their accompanying grounds offered visitors the president’s, or those closest to him, own version of his life or presidency. These memorials have shied away from acknowledging their own flawed stories, but rather they have hidden behind the federal agencies that run them in order to gain a degree of legitimacy in the eyes of the public as a historical institution.⁵⁴

Presidential libraries have evolved since FDR opened the doors of his library into institutions more interested in presidential commemoration than serving as repositories for history. The libraries original purpose centered around public access to government

⁵³ “Easy and interesting stop right off the I-80,” review of Hoover Historic Site TripAdvisor page, posted July 3, 2016.

⁵⁴ Dahleen Galnton, “Taxes go to operation of presidential libraries,” *Chicago Tribune*.

and ultimately the United States democracy. Roosevelt was an amateur historian who valued the preservation of his own public and private papers, but the first museum display at his presidential library consisted of artifacts from his own personal collection that included paintings, ship models, family items, and some gifts from the American people.⁵⁵ The shift in commemoration began with Harry Truman as he escalated the size and scope of his presidential library, but the commemoration process took a giant leap towards what it has become today with the construction of Lyndon Johnson's library. The LBJ Presidential Library was dedicated in 1971 with a massive structure of just over 134,000 square feet. Since the construction of the Johnson library, presidential memorialization has drastically changed. Historical interpretation of ex-presidents was no longer solely in the hands of historians, but rather friends, family, and local communities helped shape their legacy with the stories they told.

Presidential libraries and historic sites are aimed towards a public who think these structures were created to provide an accurate history of the president's life and time in office, but their insistence on making the good seem great and the bad seem better ultimately reveal their true purpose. Presidential libraries have influenced local and regional identities using heritage and memory shrouded as historical fact. With the case of West Branch and Herbert Hoover the historic sites not only presented the story of Herbert Hoover, but historicized the landscape using memory to show why it has "mattered deeply to an individual mind and identity."⁵⁶

⁵⁵ FDR Library, "Library History," *FDR Library*, accessed on April 13, 2017.

⁵⁶ Ryden, "Writing the Midwest," 527.

Fourteen presidential libraries and their grounds dot the country from New York to California. Their existence told of a fascination with the American presidency. Historians have argued their usefulness to the American people and their impacts on national identity and have found them manipulative and even referred to as “museums of spin” by presidential scholar Ben Hufbauer.⁵⁷ Presidential libraries were created with the idea to give the public access to presidential administrations, but ultimately their geography limited the public’s exposure. Because of their locality, presidential libraries have targeted audiences at local and regional levels. As was the case in West Branch, the location of these presidential commemorations matters because it informed the story that was told. The location of the presidential library gave the local public a claim to a piece of American history, but also allowed their local identity to shine bright with the legitimacy that only a United States President could give.

⁵⁷ Dahleen Galnton, “Taxes go to operation of presidential libraries,” *Chicago Tribune*.

CHAPTER 2

HERBERT HOOVER AND HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

In November 1948, former President Herbert Hoover delivered one of his most popular speeches at a Wilmington College fundraiser. “It is a curious fact that when we get sick, we want an uncommon doctor; if we have a construction job, we want an uncommon engineer; when we get into war, we dreadfully want an uncommon admiral and an uncommon general. Only when we get into politics are we content with the common man,” he told the Ohio audience.¹ With his speech, Hoover sought to inspire the students and faculty in attendance to become leaders and strive to become something more than a “common man.”²

Herbert Hoover lived, by any standard, an uncommon life. Born in West Branch, IA to Jesse and Hulda Minthorn Hoover on August 10, 1874, Hoover grew up loving the outdoors. “I prefer to think of Iowa as I saw it through the eyes of a ten-year-old boy . . . filled with the wonders of Iowa’s streams and woods, of the mystery of growing crops. They saw days filled with adventure and great undertakings, with participation in good and comforting things. They saw days of stern but kindly discipline,” wrote Hoover on his childhood in Iowa.³ This fascination with the outdoors remained with him for the rest of his life.

¹ Herbert Hoover, “Uncommon Man” (speech given at a Wilmington College, Wilmington, Ohio, November 11, 1948), National Archives Catalog, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/187092>.

² Ibid.

³ Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: Years of Adventure, 1874-1920*, 1.

The former President and humanitarian possesses one of the most fascinating and complicated legacies of any US President. Framing Hoover has been difficult for historians, and their interpretations of his life have varied since he exited the White House in 1933. What follows is an attempt to recount Hoover's life and capture historians' changing perspectives of the 31st President and the unbelievable life he lived. Herbert Hoover remains a difficult figure for historians to interpret. In the immediate years following his presidency, Hoover was cast as the villain of the Great Depression who caused the sharp economic downturn and cost millions of people their well-being.

Historical interpretations of Hoover have varied since his exit from the White House. Most important in the interpretations of Hoover has been historian's choice of narratives to tell his story. The way in which Hoover's story has been told has influenced the way in which people have remembered his life. By choosing certain narratives, historians help shape public memory. In the case of Hoover, historians distanced him from the Great Depression and lifted him up as a shining example of conservative ideals. Despite historical interpretations, Hoover remained synonymous with the Great Depression and his failure to stem the tide. Wading through the murkiness of Hoover's legacy is essential in understanding his life as well as his memorialization.

He lived through periods of extreme wealth and depression. He traveled the world, amassing an enormous fortune as well as the goodwill of the world. He helped feed Europe after both World War I & II, saving millions of lives in the process. He served as Secretary of Commerce, pushing for efficiency and innovation in all walks of life. Yet, he remains a relatively forgotten figure in the public's memory. Hoover's

legacy, to some degree, will always be tied to the Great Depression and his failure to stop the nation's suffering.

Tracing the historical record of Hoover cannot commence without an examination of the times in which he lived. Born in the 19th century, Hoover grew up in the immediate aftermath of the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution was encapsulated by the debate between optimists and cynics. Optimists saw the potential of industry while the cynics saw the ill-effects of long, difficult hours of work.⁴ The optimism of the period was not lost on Hoover and stuck with him as he entered public life.

Hoover's childhood in Iowa helped shape the man he later became. He valued his education as a boy and loved to spend time outdoors. By the time Hoover turned nine years old, both of his parents had passed away. Hoover remained in Iowa under the care of his uncle Allan Hoover. Allan owned his own farm, and Bert quickly acclimated himself to his new life. Working on his uncle's farm was Hoover's first real experience with farms as well as economics. Speaking from his own experience planting corn, milking cows, and sawing wood, Hoover called his childhood a "Montessori school in stark reality."⁵ His time farming undoubtedly influenced his economic and political philosophies as an adult.

Per Hoover, "a farm was not only a farm but all kinds of factories. Here the family performed all the functions of a Chicago packer, a Cincinnati soap company, a

⁴ Charles More, *Understanding the Industrial Revolution*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 138-139.

⁵ Herbert C. Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: Years of Adventure, 1874-1920*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1951), 5. The "Montessori school" refers to an educational approach that puts the impetus on the student.

Duluth carpet factory and a California canner . . . farm families were their own lawyers, labor leaders, engineers, doctors, tailors, dressmakers, and beauty parlor artists.”⁶ This idea of self-sufficiency became a staple in Hoover’s political identity. In 1928, during Hoover’s aptly titled speech “Principles and Ideals of the United States Government”, he talked at length about the “American system” of self-government and “rugged individualism” that allowed the nation’s people to know “unparalleled greatness.”⁷

Despite the plethora of literature written about the former President, few historians have tried to capture the importance of the Quaker faith to Hoover. He grew up a reserved child and remained so into adulthood. Growing up his father made sure he abided by Quaker principles. Despite some of Hoover’s attempts to thwart his religious duties, many of his father’s teachings stuck with him. At its best, “Quakerism . . . thus nurtures self-respect and self-reliance. It enjoins a sense of personal obligation and in turn provides scope for personal talent, for freedom of thought and conscience within the framework of the Christian ethic.” Quakers place a heavy emphasis on individualism and their “usefulness to others.”⁸ Hoover certainly reflected many of his Quaker values during his private and public careers.

Hoover’s Quaker background has been a hard topic to nail down as historians seemed to either brush over it rather quickly, leave it out altogether, or used it to help humanize the former President as was the case in Eugene Lyons, David Hinshaw, and

⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁷ Herbert Hoover, “Principles and Ideals of the United States Government” (speech, October 28, 1928), Miller Center, <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/speech-6000>.

⁸ Eugene Lyons, *Herbert Hoover: A Biography*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964), 7.

Glen Jeansonne's works regarding Hoover.⁹ There has been such little variation in what has been written about Hoover's childhood; but predictably so, as Hoover had not talked much about his Quaker faith until he released his memoirs in the 1950s. Despite the lack of literature about his faith, Hoover was undoubtedly influenced by the individualism practiced by many Quakers. A quick look at Hoover's life, in particular his humanitarian efforts, indicated his Quaker roots influenced him far more than his Iowa or Oregon upbringing and instilled in him the obligation to help others that can be seen through his humanitarian and relief efforts.

Hoover remained in West Branch until the age of eleven, at which point he went to live with his uncle, Dr. Henry Minthorn, in Newberg, Oregon in 1885. Dr. Minthorn put Hoover to work feeding ponies, milking the family cow, and splitting firewood. Hoover spent much of his time in Newberg working, but he managed to find time to explore Oregon's vast wilderness. In Newberg, he attended school until the age of fourteen, at which point he took a job working for his uncle's newly-opened land-settlement business. As Hoover worked for his uncle during the day, he enrolled in a variety of math classes at a nearby business college in the evening. Hoover's interactions with older men and women introduced him to public affairs. The most important introduction was to engineer Robert Brown. Brown came into his uncle's office where he met Hoover and struck up a conversation with the young boy. The two spoke about

⁹ Glen Jeansonne, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: Fighting Quaker, 1928-1933*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Eugene Lyons, *Herbert Hoover: A Biography*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964); David Hinshaw, *Herbert Hoover: American Quaker*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1950).

engineering and the advantages of going to college for a profession. This interaction struck a chord with Hoover as he took an interest in mechanical engineering. In an attempt to learn everything he could about engineering, Hoover visited a mining prospect in the Cascades. Hoover's experience in the Cascades changed his mind about mechanical engineering. Hoover's family expected him to attend a Quaker college, but Hoover became adamantly opposed after learning the school did not offer engineering courses.

An opportunity to study engineering soon emerged when a notice appeared for public entrance exams for the newly-founded, free university founded by Senator Leland Stanford in California. Hoover traveled to Portland to take the entrance exams; but because of his limited schooling in Oregon, outside of mathematics, he "was sadly deficient in other approaches to higher education."¹⁰ Fortunately for Hoover, Dr. Joseph Swain, a mathematics professor at Stanford, administered the exam. Seeing Hoover's proficiency in math, he pulled Hoover into his room and implored him to arrive at the University three months early to spend time with a tutor. Dr. Swain believed that Hoover could earn his way into Stanford. Hoover agreed, resigned from his position at his uncle's office, and set out for California with "\$160 of savings, two suits of clothes and a bicycle . . . the Minthorn family added \$50 and put me on the train with blessings, affections—and food."¹¹

¹⁰ Herbert C. Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: Years of Adventure, 1874-1920*, 14-15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

Hoover arrived in California ready to earn a spot in Stanford University's inaugural class. He spent three months studying with a tutor preparing to take the entrance exams again. The day of the exams arrived; and Hoover's hours of studying paid off, as he had been accepted into Stanford's inaugural class. Acceptance into Stanford marked the beginning of his career as a mining engineer. Hoover chose to study geology, but needed to find a way to make some money. In addition to starting a small laundry service on campus, Hoover worked various office jobs earning around \$30 a month. Also, Hoover worked as an assistant on Geological Surveys of Arkansas, California, and Nevada over multiple summer vacations.

For Hoover, Stanford was a "small community of intimate association between professors and students."¹² He took an interest in many different subjects including physics, chemistry, math, and mechanics. Hoover did not possess extraordinary intelligence, but he worked hard during his years at Stanford to earn his degree in geology. Hoover's time at Stanford saw him become the student body treasurer as well as a manager of the baseball and football teams. One of the most notable happenings of Hoover's time at Stanford was his encounter with his future wife, Miss Lou Henry. Hoover admittedly devoted little time to his fellow coeds, but felt he needed to aid Lou Henry in her freshman geology studies because of her "whimsical mind, her blue eyes, and a broad grinnish smile that came from an Irish ancestor."

Lou Henry hailed from Waterloo, Iowa. She shared many of the same interests as Hoover, including his love of the outdoors. The two met during Hoover's senior year.

¹² Ibid., 20.

After graduating he continued to correspond with Lou Henry over the next three years until she graduated in 1898.¹³ Hoover graduated in 1895 with a degree in geology and set out to find work as he only had \$40 to his name. Hoover struggled to find work right out of Stanford, but he gladly accepted a position pushing ore carts in a gold mine near Nevada City, California.¹⁴

After Hoover graduated from Stanford he set out to Australia and began his career as a mining engineer. Although Hoover lived in Australia, he always had one eye towards the United States. At the turn of the century Republican Theodore Roosevelt took the White House and epitomized what came to be known as the Progressive Era, which was marked by “the realization of serious problems that had to be resolved and major movements bringing improvement and reform in multiple fields, including equality of sex, race, and religion and a general cleansing of the political processes and government, with increased fairness and justice.”¹⁵

After graduating from Stanford, Hoover accepted a mining engineer position in Nevada City, California. He worked there for a few months, but the mining slowed and he was let go. Out of a job and looking for work, he moved to Berkeley to join his brother and sister. Because of a previous introduction to Louis Janin, a well-known mining

¹³ Ibid., 21-22.

¹⁴ Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, “Herbert Hoover: Life Before the Presidency,” accessed on January 3, 2017, <http://millercenter.org-/president/biography/hover-life-before-the-presidency>

¹⁵ Catherine Cocks, Peter C. Holloran, Alan Lessoff, *The A to Z of the Progressive Era*, (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2009), xi; *Was the Industrial Revolution Necessary?*, ed. Graeme Snooks, (London: Routledge, 2012).

engineer who lived in San Francisco, Hoover visited his office and sought a meeting. Hoover landed an office job because of his meeting, and he quickly became a trusted assistant to Mr. Janin. Hoover routinely traveled the country inspecting and evaluating mines for potential purchase. Hoover worked hard over the next couple years until he received a job offer from the British mining firm Bewick, Moreing and Company to join them as a mining engineer for Australia. Hoover accepted the offer and moved to Australia in 1897. There, he corresponded with Lou Henry regularly, and their relationship grew beyond friendship. After Lou Henry finished her schooling Hoover sent a cable from Australia asking for her hand in marriage. She accepted Hoover's offer, and they married in 1899. Immediately after their wedding the newlyweds set out for China, as Hoover had been reassigned to oversee a new mining project.

Hoover quickly found success with Bewick, Moreing & Co. and began to amass a rather large fortune. By 1902, Hoover and Lou Henry moved back to Australia after Hoover became a partner in the Bewick, Moreing & Co. mining firm. Hoover continued to build his reputation, and in 1908 he opened his own independent consultant firm for mining companies around the world. Hoover spent the next several years traveling the globe, gaining a better understanding of global issues and growing his intellect. By 1914, Hoover yearned for more than wealth; and the outbreak of World War I provided him with an opportunity for public service.¹⁶

¹⁶ Herbert C. Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: Years of Adventure, 1874-1920*, 29-73.

Hoover's life story has generally been written about by historians in distinct sections. His pre-World War I years laid the foundation for who he became as a politician. The first forty years of his life are interpreted the same, and it is not until his time in public office there is much variation amongst historians. For the most part historians chose to chronicle the early years of his life rather than provide any meaningful analysis. However, there was one exception; and it came in 1920. In *The Making of Herbert Hoover* historian Rose Wilder Lane painted a picture of Hoover that so flattering it is hard to take seriously. In the books opening paragraph, Lane wrote, "In Herbert Hoover's own experience, from his strange boyhood to his myth-like success, he has lived through all the phases of development that have created America itself. The forces that made the country made the man and behind the growth of his soul there is shown the growth of the nation."¹⁷ The book was hard-pressed for sources and provided very little in terms of citations but was one of the earliest works on Hoover. The work succeeded in painting an early picture of Hoover and reflected the goodwill that much of the world held for him during the era.

Historians in the decades since have relied heavily on Hoover's own writings including his memoirs, presidential papers, and personal correspondences to craft their narratives. Limited by his own writings historians have not come up with a variety of interpretations about his upbringing and mining career.¹⁸

¹⁷ Rose Wilder Lane, *The Making of Herbert Hoover*, (New York: The Century Co., 1920): v.

¹⁸ Wilton Eckley, *Herbert Hoover*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1980), 1-27; Eugene Lyons, *Herbert Hoover: A Biography*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964); 1-83; George H. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: The Engineer, 1874-1914*, (New

As Hoover made a name for himself overseas, he remained relatively unknown to the people of the United States; but with the onset of World War I in 1914 his time in the shadows ended. Transitioning from the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt to Woodrow Wilson, the nation and its way of life transformed once again. Idealism marked Wilson's presidency; but World War I defined the era, and as historians later surmised, Hoover's presidency.¹⁹ Hoover emerged on the world stage during Wilson's time in office as the head of the Belgian relief effort in the midst of World War I. The relief effort marked the beginning of Hoover's path towards public life, and how his presidential library ultimately chose to remember him.

With a growing reputation for turning around large mining operations with speed and efficiency, Hoover became a sought-after commodity in the European relief effort. Hoover's first of many humanitarian efforts came in evacuating nearly 120,000 Americans in Europe during Germany's opening offensive. This became a pivotal moment in Hoover's life as his engineering career ended and he "was on the slippery road of public life."²⁰

With the German invasion of Belgium in August 1914 a world crisis arose. For years Belgium had relied heavily on importing much of their food, but with British Naval

York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983); Jean Hoff Wilson, *Herbert Hoover: Forgotten Progressive*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975); Frank T. Nye Jr., *Doors of Opportunity: the Life and Legacy of Herbert Hoover*, (West Branch, IA: Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Association, 1988).

¹⁹ Miller Center, "Woodrow Wilson: Impact and Legacy," University of Virginia, accessed on March 10, 2017.

²⁰ Herbert C. Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: Years of Adventure, 1874-1920*, 145-148.

blockades and Germany's refusal to feed the starving people food became scarce.²¹ The task of feeding the Belgians became more complicated than simply purchasing and transporting materials.

With relief efforts at a standstill, Hoover negotiated with the Allies to establish the Committee for the Relief of Belgium (CRB), a neutral organization that would obtain and distribute food and supplies to the people of Belgium. Because the CRB did not have direct government support, Hoover raised millions of dollars from around the world with the help of other Allied representatives. The CRB accomplished its goal by the end of the war, but the commitment and supplies needed grew beyond expectations. Ultimately the CRB was a success, providing five million tons of food to the Belgian people over the course of WWI.

In the midst of World War I President Woodrow Wilson extended an offer to Hoover to become the U.S. Food Administrator.²² Hoover accepted the President's offer and quickly began coordinating efforts to ration domestic food supplies that would feed allied troops. Hoover quickly gained favorability among the American people as well as his peers for his work. Hoover's previous work as a mining engineer was particularly helpful during this period

²¹ At the time of WWI Belgium produced only 30% of its own food.

²² "Hoover Named by President: Appointed Food Administrator Under the New Food Legislation," *Spencer Owen County Democrat*, August 16, 1917, accessed October 18, 2016.

overseeing such large humanitarian operations in which efficiency and speed were crucial. Hoover became a household name. Interestingly, during the war to “Hooverize” a verb Americans came to understand meant the “rationing of household items.”²³

At the end of World War I Hoover was appointed as the director general of the American Relief Administration (ARA). The ARA was established to help combat the extensive famine across Europe.²⁴ As the head of the ARA Hoover helped channel over 34 million tons of American food, clothing, and other supplies to twenty European nations.²⁵ Illustrating the dire needs of post-war Europe Dr. Vernon Kellogg, a member of the ARA, said, “The saddest sight in Europe today is that of the children of eight, ten and twelve years of age, who look like children of four, six and eight years . . . they have been underfed for four years . . . the parents of many are absolutely destitute . . . their feeble voices cry to the world for help.”²⁶ Despite having won good will around the world from his relief efforts, Hoover cemented his popularity by the end of WWI. This good will can be seen in a *Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette* article in which Hoover received a glowing review as a man who “became the good angel of all the stranded Americans in Europe at the beginning of the world war” and whose remarkability has not been matched by the present generation.²⁷

²³ Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, “Herbert Hoover: Life Before the Presidency,” accessed on November 2, 2016, <http://millercenter.org/president/biography/hoover-life-before-the-presidency>.

²⁴ “Herbert Hoover Biographical Sketch,” Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum.

²⁵ Miller Center of Public Affairs, “Herbert Hoover: Life Before the Presidency.”

²⁶ “Children of Europe Show War’s Effects,” *Logansport Daily Tribune*, June 21, 1919.

²⁷ “Herbert Hoover Entertains,” *Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette*, October 21, 1919.

After Hoover's successful campaign to fight hunger in Europe he became a sought-after political candidate for the 1920 presidential election. Hoover, who had not declared a political party, was courted by both major political parties. As a reporter for the *Steubenville Herald-Star* noted, "If only we knew where Herbert Hoover stood. If we could make sure of him—why we would win in a walk if we nominated him for president."²⁸ Hoover's reputation and popularity made him an incredibly sought-after candidate for Democrats and Republicans. Despite calls from both parties, Hoover declared himself a Republican, but had no interest in the presidential nomination. Instead Hoover accepted President Warren G. Harding's offer to become US Secretary of Commerce.²⁹

The political landscape of the 1920s perfectly encapsulated the madness of the decade. Woodrow Wilson left the White House in 1921 replaced by Republican Senator Warren G. Harding. He campaigned under the guise of "A Return to Normalcy," and Harding easily captured the presidency after "the nation's fatigue with the reform agenda of Woodrow Wilson."³⁰ The 1921 election ushered in a decade of conservatism. Unfortunately for Harding, he would not see the end of his term as he died suddenly in 1923. His Vice President Calvin Coolidge assumed the mantle of president for the remainder of Harding's term as well as reelection in 1924. With the 1928 election

²⁸ "Lawrence Booms Hoover," *Steubenville Herald-Star*, December 29, 1919.

²⁹ "Herbert Hoover Biographical Sketch," Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum.

³⁰ Miller Center, "Warren G. Harding: Life in Brief," University of Virginia, accessed on March 10, 2017.

approaching many assumed Coolidge would seek and easily win a second term. Coolidge decided against running, and this left the Republican Party in a scramble to fill the void.

The 1920s in America went by several names: The Jazz Age, the Roaring Twenties, and to some, the Coolidge years. The 1920s were “a period of ebullient optimism and robust living, a period of hyperactivity . . . an age of contradictions.”³¹ The Twenties were a period of prosperity and progressivism as the country rose to new heights in the years following World War I. Hoover seemed a perfect fit for an age of optimism and economic prosperity.

Although the 1920s saw a post-war boom, the beginning of the decade was far from prosperous. Historian Eric Burns explained the paradox of the post-war attitude when he wrote, “(Americans) were joyful, of course, but at other times saddened; optimistic, but no less confused; enthusiastic, yet unable to escape a certain sense of dread. . . Americans were joyful, naturally, that the fighting in Europe was over. . . but their sadness that the troops had ever had to depart in the first place still lingered.”³²

Hoover’s reputation from World War I served him well during his time as Secretary of Commerce. Hoover elevated the Department of Commerce to be as influential as the State and Treasury Departments. As Secretary of Commerce, Hoover made improving efficiency standards across the country a primary goal. Hoover pushed for research into measures designed to counter harmful business cycles. He also supported regulations for new industries such as aviation and radio and brought together

³¹ Jules Abels, *In the Time of Silent Cal*, (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1969), 9.

³² Eric Burns, *1920: The Year that Made the Decade Roar*, (New York: Pegasus Books, 2015), 1-2.

hundreds of industries and convinced them to use standardized tools, hardware, building materials, and automobile parts. Hoover was a proponent of international trade, and he made a push to win trade reforms by strengthening or existing government agencies or creating new ones.³³ One of the agencies Hoover strengthened was the Bureau of Standards whose mission was, and remains today, “to promote U.S. innovation and industrial competitiveness by advancing measurement science, standards, and technology in ways that enhance economic security and improve our quality of life.”³⁴

The time that Hoover spent as Commerce Secretary reflected his feelings about the role of government. Hoover believed in the individual and equal opportunity for everyone. Hoover shared this same sentiment campaigning for the presidency in 1928. In his speech entitled “Principles and ideals of the United States Government” Hoover spoke about his idea of what the Republican Party stood for and meant to him. Hoover believed in the individual, and this belief helped shape his political philosophy. Hoover said of his party:

It is just as definite and positive a political and social system as has ever been developed on earth. It is founded upon a particular conception of self-government; in which decentralized local responsibility is the very base. Further than this, it is founded upon the conception that only through ordered liberty, freedom and equal opportunity to the individual will his initiative and enterprise spur on the march of progress. And in our insistence upon equality of opportunity has our system advanced beyond all the world.³⁵

³³ Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, “Herbert Hoover: Life Before the Presidency,” accessed on November 2, 2016, <http://millercenter.org/president/biography/hover-life-before-the-presidency>.

³⁴ National Institute of Science and Technology, “NIST General Information,” published August 25, 2016, <https://www.nist.gov/director/pao/nist-general-information>.

³⁵ Herbert Hoover, “Principles and Ideals of the United States Government,” (campaign speech, New York City, October 22, 1928).

Hoover clearly believed in the power of the individual and the power of conservatism. Hoover believed in a smaller government that did not interfere in business. Much of Hoover's time as Commerce Secretary was indicative of this philosophy as he tried to "regularize the business cycle, eliminating ebbs and flows and generating higher economic growth."³⁶ There have been many presidents before and after Hoover, but not many who seemed as intended for success in the White House.

As President Calvin Coolidge's first term came to a close, the nation wondered what the election of 1928 held. Would Coolidge run for a second term? Many possible candidates arose but "consisted primarily of a pride of senatorial lions, all longtime pols, some them renowned orators and each of them commanding genuine allegiance in their home districts, but none with a national following. . . And then there was Hoover." As Secretary of Commerce Hoover revolutionized the position but remained largely out of the public's eye. He possessed a unique position and could "offer a vision grounded in real-world experience" and "enjoyed unrivaled moral stature at home and the world over, an enduring legacy of his exploits during the cataclysm of the world war . . . his service with the American mission during the peace talks at Versailles, marked him as an American leader of a different stripe."³⁷

In 1927, President Calvin Coolidge gave his secretary a note to distribute to newspaper correspondents telling of his decision not to seek reelection for his second

³⁶ Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, "Herbert Hoover: Life Before the Presidency."

³⁷ Charles Rappleye, *Herbert Hoover in the White House: The Ordeal of the Presidency*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 9-11.

term as President. The cryptic statement by the president read: "I do not choose to run for President in nineteen-twenty-eight." The media as well as the nation were puzzled by the president's statement and wanted clarification. Even Hoover, as Secretary of Commerce, sought clarification from the President. President Coolidge kept quiet about his statement, enjoying the nation's curiosity until Hoover came to him for a third time requesting to know the truth. Hoover was loyal to Coolidge but had become a target candidate to enter his name in the Ohio primaries. Ultimately, Coolidge decided against running again, and Hoover accepted the invitation for the Ohio primary on February 12, 1928.³⁸

Hoover won the Republican nomination and began to travel the country campaigning for election. Running against the Democratic New York Governor, Alfred E. Smith, Hoover campaigned on the promise to:

Assure national defense, maintain economy in the administration of government, protect American workmen, farmers, and business men alike from competition arising out of lower standards of living abroad, foster individual initiative, insure stability of business and employment, promote our foreign commerce, and develop our national resources.³⁹

Hoover's campaign portrayed him as an efficient engineer, humanitarian, self-made man, and a man with skill and experience in international markets. His humanitarian efforts as well as experience with the previous two administrations helped draw voters.⁴⁰ Despite some skeptics from inside his own party, Hoover won the election in a landslide vote

³⁸Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: The Cabinet and the Presidency, 1920-1933*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952); 190.

³⁹ Herbert Hoover, letter to George H. Moses, June 14, 1928.

⁴⁰ Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, "Herbert Hoover: Campaigns and Elections."

over Gov. Smith, 444-87. With his victory in hand Hoover assembled his staff and began to formulate policies for his administration.⁴¹

Hoover's acceptance speech was filled with hope and a promise of prosperity for the American people, touching on topics from Prohibition to world peace. Speaking the words that would ultimately haunt Hoover's presidency and legacy he concluded:

Ours is a land rich in resources; stimulating in its glorious beauty; filled with millions of happy homes; blessed with comfort and opportunity. In no nation are the institutions of progress more advanced. In no nation are the fruits of accomplishment more secure. In no nation is the government more worthy of respect. No country is more loved by its people. I have an abiding faith in their capacity, integrity and high purpose. I have no fears for the future of our country. It is bright with hope.⁴²

The future of the nation looked bright, but the worst economic collapse in the nation's history was on the horizon. Unbeknownst to Hoover he quickly found himself in a struggle to aid the very people that he swore hope and prosperity to in his first address as President.

Hoover took office on March 4, 1929, and quickly began to fulfill the promises of his campaign. He came into the White House with numerous policies aimed in three different directions. First, Hoover aimed to improve the nation's infrastructure. Second, he believed the nation was in dire need of social and business reforms. Finally, Hoover wished to improve foreign relations by shifting the conversation towards peace and

⁴¹ Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: The Cabinet and the Presidency, 1920-1933*, 210.

⁴² Herbert Hoover, "Inaugural Address," (speech, Washington, DC, March 24, 1929), Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum, <https://hoover.archives.gov/info/inauguralspeech.html>.

progress. Hoover accomplished many of the goals he set out for himself, but the economic depression ultimately stifled many of his proposed plans.⁴³

Hoover wanted to govern in the progressive style of former President Teddy Roosevelt and immediately began to move forward with “the reconstruction and development measures” he advocated for while Secretary of Commerce. The measures Hoover pushed for included the development of water resources, conservation of natural resources including land, better organization of land and marine transit, improvement of roads, public buildings and parks, better housing, protection for children and an expansion of scientific research.⁴⁴ Also, within his first-year Hoover took aim at two major issues: the nation’s struggling agriculture sector and tariff reform.

Throughout much of the 1920s the nation’s farmers produced an overabundance of food. Overproduction combined with a more competitive global agricultural market caused prices and profits to drop significantly for farmers in the US. In order to combat the struggles of American farmers Hoover proposed “the creation of a Federal Farm Board with a large capital to aid agriculture and . . . build up the cooperatives so as to decrease destructive competition between farmers.” Hoover’s proposal met strong opposition in Congress, but eventually passed in June 1929 as part of the Agricultural Marketing Act.⁴⁵ The farm board aimed to ensure that the agriculture industry would be on equal economic standing with other industries.⁴⁶ Before the Federal Farm Board could

⁴³ Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: The Cabinet and the Presidency*, 223

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 253-254.

⁴⁶ “Farm Board Queries,” *Mason City Globe Gazette*, April 9, 1930.

serve its intended purpose the Stock Exchange crash occurred and forced the Board to become a tool for combating the depression. Building on the agriculture possibilities for farmers, Hoover aimed to increase tariffs on incoming agricultural products in order to give American farmers an advantage. This became a subject of much debate between Democrats and Republicans as they were unable to reach a middle ground and tariff reforms halted.

The cause of the Great Depression is still debated by historians and economists today. However, both groups agree there was not a single cause or the depression happened all at once. Concerning Hoover, the Great Depression defined his Presidency and played a huge role in shaping his legacy. The US stock market had been prosperous throughout much of the 1920s, but began to decline in September 1929. The stock market took a sharp decline in October and has often been credited as the beginning of the Depression in the United States.

As the nation fell further into the depression Hoover focused his efforts on combating the poor economic conditions in which many people found themselves. Hoover's reputation as the "master of emergencies" came under fire as the nation's economic woes continued. By the end of 1930 the unemployment rate climbed to 8.7%, which meant that over 4 million people were out of work. To paint a much broader picture, by the end of 1930 over 1,300 banks had failed and industrial production dropped

by more than 25%.⁴⁷ Despite rising unemployment rates, Hoover felt that the depression was a part of a larger world problem and that recovery would be slow.⁴⁸

As the nation fell further and further into depression Hoover refused to offer direct government relief, believing that the nation's economic problem could be fixed at the local level. In a radio broadcast to the nation Hoover highlighted his belief in the individual saying:

The evidence of our ability to solve great problems outside of government action and the degree of moral strength with which we emerge from this period will be determined by whether the individuals and the local communities continue to meet their responsibilities . . . Victory over this depression and over our other difficulties will be won by the resolution of our people to fight their own battles in their own communities, by stimulating their ingenuity to solve their own problems, by taking new courage to be masters of their own destiny in the struggle of life.⁴⁹

Hoover's speech encapsulated his political leanings, but also the faith he possessed in his fellow countrymen. Hoover felt that the role of government was "to give leadership to the initiative, the courage, and the fortitude of the people themselves, but it must insist upon individual, community, and state responsibility."⁵⁰ Hoover sought to empower the American people to take action against the depression in their own communities. Many of

⁴⁷ "Herbert Hoover Biographical Sketch," Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum; Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, "Herbert Hoover: Domestic Affairs."

⁴⁸ Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: The Great Depression, 1929-1941*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952); 29-30.

⁴⁹ Herbert Hoover, radio broadcast (station unknown), February 12, 1931, transcript found in Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: The Great Depression, 1929-1941*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952); 33.

⁵⁰ Herbert Hoover, "Speech in Indianapolis (June 15, 1931), in Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: The Great Depression, 1929-1941*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952); 37.

the policies Hoover enacted to combat the depression provided no direct federal relief: rather, he encouraged the development of public works projects and granted loans to states. Unfortunately for Hoover, many of his policies proved to be inadequate; and the national crisis continued to grow deeper as more than 2,000 more banks closed and the number of unemployed grew to nearly 7 million by the start of 1932.⁵¹

As 1932 approached so did the next presidential election. Hoover's opposition came from the Democratic candidate Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Although much of the country had turned against Hoover, he felt that he had the nation on the right track and should be the one to lead the country out of its worst economic period in history. Hoover traveled the nation campaigning, but to no avail, as he was soundly defeated 472-59 by FDR.⁵² Little needed to be said about the 1932 election as the results spoke for themselves.

The Great Depression consumed Hoover's time in office, but his failures to stop it consumed his legacy. Despite his best efforts, Hoover failed to deliver on the promises he made during his campaign to eradicate poverty and strengthen the country. Hoover will always be tied to his time as President of the United States, but his best accomplishments lay in his numerous humanitarian works. After Hoover left office in 1933 he largely remained out of the public eye.

⁵¹ Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, "Herbert Hoover: Domestic Affairs."

⁵² John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, "Election of 1932," *University of California-Santa Barbara: The American Presidency Project*, accessed on Jan. 8, 2017, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>.

Hoover moved to California after leaving office and became opposed to President Roosevelt's New Deal policies. Hoover wrote a series of public letters and essays, which condemned many of FDR's actions to combat the depression. In addition to his public letters, Hoover wrote multiple books that questioned FDR's depression policies and their effects on the country.⁵³ Hoover traveled the world extensively after his presidency, even meeting with Adolf Hitler in 1938. With the onset of World War II Hoover became opposed to the prospect of a United States entry into the conflict until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor changed his mind.

During the war, Hoover continued to travel the globe giving speeches across the US. When the war ended in 1945 the United States faced a troubling situation in Europe. Millions of people relied on foreign support for food and supplies. Feeling the urgency of the situation, President Harry Truman consulted with Hoover because of his "rich experience in the field of food relief."⁵⁴ Hoover became a trusted adviser for President Truman concerning the food relief effort of many European countries. On March 1, 1946, President Truman created the Famine Emergency Committee and offered to Hoover to serve as the honorary chairman of the group. Hoover accepted the president's offer and immediately met with Truman in the White House.

⁵³ Herbert Hoover, *The Challenge to Liberty*, (New York: Scribner, 1934); Herbert Hoover, *American Ideals versus the New Deal*, (New York: Scribner, 1936); Herbert Hoover, *America's Way Forward*, (New York: Scribner, 1938); Herbert Hoover, *Shall We Send Our Youth to War?*, (New York: Coward-McCann, 1939).

⁵⁴ Harry S. Truman, *Years of Decisions, Vol. 1*, (New York: The New American Library, 1955); 344.

After Hoover met with the members of the newly formed group President Truman asked him to travel and “make a detailed study of conditions in the famine areas of the world.”⁵⁵ Hoover agreed and immediately set out around the world traveling to twenty-two countries encompassing nearly 35,000 miles to put together his findings.⁵⁶ After he returned to the U.S. Hoover continued to advise President Truman with the effort as well as Russia. The relief effort in Europe ultimately succeeded in its mission with momentum that Hoover helped create. At the request of President Truman, Hoover stepped back into the public eye to aid in the relief effort; and, in the process, he gained back the good will he lost during his presidency.

The national and local media spoke highly of Hoover and his efforts to once again feed Europe. This marked a shift in opinion regarding Hoover, as his favorability had plummeted post-presidency. An article in the *Montana Standard* showcased Hoover’s newfound popularity stating: “Former President Herbert Hoover is back at a task for which . . . he sprung to the presidency. . . The people of the United States . . . may be assured of one thing: Mr. Hoover will do what he has set out to do without fear or favoritism. He will not permit people to die a terrible death of starvation because their political beliefs may not agree with those he holds.”⁵⁷

With the majority of the nation back on Hoover’s side and nearly three months of traveling and negotiating with foreign countries to help provide food, Hoover’s service

⁵⁵ Ibid., 520.

⁵⁶ Herbert Hoover, Letter to President Harry Truman, May 13, 1946.

⁵⁷ “The People Have Faith in Herbert Hoover,” *Montana Standard*, March 14, 1946, accessed on January 9, 2017. www.newspaperarchive.com.

seemingly came to a close. After aiding much of the world after WWII, Hoover served as an adviser for President Truman throughout much of his presidency and remained active within the Republican Party, and the Boys Club of America; and he even authored over forty books.

Herbert Hoover left behind a legacy difficult to fully understand. In his early life Hoover traveled the world amassing a good reputation and a great fortune. Soon public life called to him, and he earned the world's favor helping feed Europe after WWI. Shortly after, Hoover successfully served as Secretary of Commerce under two presidents until he could no longer ignore the calls to run for the presidency himself. Hoover became a favorite for the presidency and won in a landslide. He seemed destined for success in the White House, which made his failures so astounding. The reputation Hoover had built before his time in office only made his failures as president worse. Unable to combat the depression, the public lost faith in Hoover and chose to elect Franklin Roosevelt in a landslide. Hoover left office having faced the worst defeat of his political career.

In the years that followed his presidency Hoover spent his time out of the public eye enjoying the outdoors and traveling the world. With the onset of WWII Hoover was again called upon to aid in the relief of Europe and perhaps his reputation as well. At the request of President Truman he accepted the president's offer, fed Europe once again, and ultimately earned back much of the goodwill he had lost. Hoover came from modest beginnings in Iowa and ascended to the highest office in the US. Hoover engineered a successful, uncommon life by any standard; but his failures as president overshadow his

success in engineering and his humanitarian efforts. Even today, his legacy remains complicated because his triumphs far outnumber his defeats; yet he has been tied to the Great Depression and his failure to pull the nation out of its suffering. Many claims have been made about Hoover, but one cannot dispute he lived his ideals, perhaps to a fault, from his boyhood in Iowa to his death in New York in 1964.

In 1938, President Roosevelt laid out his vision for what would be the start of the presidential library system. To understand how each presidential library came about, it is important to detail the history of their governing body: the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). During President Roosevelt's time in office the ground work for the presidential library system was laid; and during his first term in office, FDR signed legislation that created NARA, which would serve as a repository to preserve the nation's history.

President Roosevelt respected history and felt it was important for the public to see the inner workings of their government. In a speech to the press, FDR laid out a plan for all of his papers, books, letters, etc. to be housed as a single collection "in their original condition, available to scholars of the future in one definite locality." Speaking more in depth about his vision for this new library Roosevelt said:

It is my thought, however, than an opportunity exists to set up for the first time in this country what might be called a source material collection relating to a specific period in our history . . . It is, therefore, my thought that funds can be raised for the erection of a separate, modern, fireproof building to be built near my family's house at Hyde Park, so designed that it would hold all of my own collections and also such other source material relating to this period in our history as might be donated to the collections in the future by other members of the present Administration.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Franklin Delano Roosevelt, statement to the press, December 10, 1938.

Roosevelt had a grand vision for this library, but more importantly he set a precedent that all subsequent presidents have followed.

FDR dedicated his library to the United States on June 30, 1941, marking the beginning of the presidential library system. There have been many Congressional rulings regarding presidential libraries but the most important remains the Presidential Libraries Act (PLA) of 1955. The PLA officially established the system of privately-built and federally-maintained libraries that exist today. The ruling encouraged Presidents to donate their materials to the government for preservation and accessibility to the American public. Since Roosevelt there have been twelve other Presidents who have constructed presidential libraries, with a plan for the fourteenth currently in the works.

In the late 1950s, Hoover agreed to the construction of a small library in his name to be built in West Branch, IA. Plans to restore Hoover's birthplace cottage and grounds were already underway. During a meeting with Neil MacNeil, a Hoover family friend, Hoover proposed his idea for a small building that would house his papers and his collection of books. Hoover proposed a building of modest size with just enough room to house all his materials, an office attendant, and a small reading room for visitors. Eventually a building plan was agreed upon and construction began on May 4, 1959.

The construction of the building became a long, drawn-out process with unforeseen complications that hindered progress. In addition to construction delays, the size of the building grew as Hoover decided to transfer more material to West Branch than he had previously committed. The building of the library took far longer than anyone involved could have foreseen; and on August 10, 1962, over three years after the

project began, Hoover dedicated his presidential library to the U.S. government and the American people. The library has since undergone multiple additions and renovations and was not officially completed until 1974.⁵⁹

The dedication of the library on Hoover's eighty-eighth birthday drew thousands of people from across Iowa as well as former President Harry Truman. Truman was in attendance to help dedicate Hoover's library just as Hoover had done for him in 1957. As a large crowd sang "Happy Birthday" to Hoover one reporter described the scene as "warm and comforting, like the memory of an old July Fourth picnic."⁶⁰ With the commemoration of his presidential library Hoover cemented his place among his contemporaries.

The library dedication became the last time that Herbert Hoover breathed the Iowa air. Two years later in New York on October 20, 1964, the former President took his final breath at the age of 90. His body traveled across the country until he was buried overlooking his hometown of West Branch. Hoover left Iowa for the first time as a young boy who enjoyed the outdoors. He returned for the final time known simply as the 31st President of the United States. An uncommon life for any man indeed.

With Hoover's death and subsequent presidential library memorialization completed, historians began to look back on his life, particularly his presidency. The purpose of these historical reinterpretations was not overt, but a closer look at the authors

⁵⁹ Frank T. Nye Jr., *Doors of Opportunity: The Life and Legacy of Herbert Hoover*, (West Branch: Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Association, Inc., 1988): 272-330

⁶⁰ Saul Pett, "How Noted Reporter Saw Hoover," *The Cedar Rapids Gazette*, August 12, 1962, accessed January 16, 2017. www.newspaperarchive.com.

choice of narrative revealed their true intentions. Historical works carry with them the influence of the time in which they are written. Historians shape the way people view the past along with how they remember the men and women in it. In the case of Herbert Hoover, history has been cruel, but historians have been kind.

Historians have written about Hoover in a variety of fashions since he exited office in 1933. Before he assumed the White House, Hoover was “an almost supernatural figure whose wisdom encompassed all branches, whose judgment was never at fault, who knew the answers to all the questions and who could see in the dark.”⁶¹ His reputation preceded him wherever he went. It seemed as if he could do no wrong; that he was destined to be the nation’s next great president, but personal shortcomings and unprecedented economic despair derailed Hoover’s success.

Hoover has been reinterpreted in three distinct time periods: the 1960s, 1980s, and most recently after the 2008 recession. In my attempt to recount the history of these reinterpretations I have chosen works from each era that best encompassed the new interpretations of Hoover. These works covered a variety of topics including biographies of Hoover, works on the Great Depression and WWII, books on Ronald Reagan, the 1980s, and conservatism today. Their common thread remained Herbert Hoover, but their interpretations differed based on the periods from which they originated.

As Hoover neared the end of his life historians began to look back on his presidency. As Hoover struggled in the throes of the Great Depression the nation developed an image of him that would not soon be forgotten due in part to a series of

⁶¹ Charles Michelson, *The Ghost Talks*, (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1944), 27.

books aimed to discredit and demonize the president. Dubbed the “smear books” by historian Rosanna Sizer, these works attacked Hoover from both sides of the aisle. Democrats blamed Hoover for failing to prevent the economic downturn while Republicans considered him a political liability.⁶²

The interpretations of Hoover that came out of this era were largely reactionary in terms of their content. As Hoover left the White House he remained out of the public eye for nearly two decades. During his public hiatus, public opinion continued to decline. The first notable reinterpretation of Hoover emerged in 1948 by historian Eugene Lyons.⁶³ Books written before the opening of Hoover’s Presidential Library archive need to be considered with a grain of salt as they lacked a variety sources to paint a well-rounded picture. The books written before 1962 lacked Hoover’s papers, which would explain Lyons reinterpretation of Hoover again in 1964. Although the number of books written during the time was limited, their interpretation was notable.

The most prominent of the books written was Eugene Lyons 1964 work, *Herbert Hoover: A Biography*, which tried to dissipate the myths surrounding the former president. Lyons’ own description of Hoover attempted to paint him in the same esteem as he was in before the Great Depression. Lyons wrote,

Hoover’s life exemplified, on the highest plane, the conventional American “success story.” But it contained, too, elements of immense pathos. He was the self-made man who from the humblest beginnings rose to transcendent heights—to the summit of his vocation, which was the mining of metals; to

⁶² Rosanna Sizer, “Herbert Hoover and the Smear Books, 1930-1932,” in *The Annals of Iowa* 47, no. 4 (1984), 343.

⁶³ Eugene Lyons, *Our Unknown Ex-President: a Portrait of Herbert Hoover*, (New York: Doubleday, 1948).

the pinnacle of his avocation, which was benevolence; to the highest office in the Republic. Then, with startling suddenness, his destiny took tragic turns.⁶⁴

As Hoover reemerged in politics under the Truman administration, so did sympathy for his time as President. Historians sought to understand the divide between public perception of Hoover and the man he was behind closed doors.⁶⁵ Biographies of Hoover focused on his intentions and his belief in people and as a true patriot. Gene Smith exemplified this when he wrote, “No one ever did more than he for more people. He was at home in a dozen countries—had maintained residences in them—but his heart stayed at home. He remained throughout an American patriot.”⁶⁶

The prominent works on Hoover during this era sought to strip Hoover of blame for the depression by focusing on his intentions. The first true reinterpretation of Hoover came on the coattails of his death in 1964 and the opening of his presidential library with particular regard to the archive and access to his presidential papers in 1962. When he reemerged as a leader during the WWII European relief effort, he earned back a level of vindication. Lyons attempted to sum up the reason for reinterpretation chalking it up to the fact that, “A nation craves heroes, in whom it can see, as in a mirror, reflections of its own most cherished attributes; it is a species of self-flattery... What the American people witnessed and savored,

⁶⁴ Eugene Lyons, *Herbert Hoover: A Biography*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964), ix.

⁶⁵ Harris Gaylord Warren, *Herbert Hoover and the Great Depression*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959); Gene Smith, *The Shattered Dream: Herbert Hoover and the Great Depression*, (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1970); Frederick E. Terman, “Herbert Hoover, Engineer,” in *Science* 147 (Jan. 1965).

⁶⁶ Gene Smith, *The Shattered Dream: Herbert Hoover and the Great Depression*, (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1970), 238.

therefore, was a vindication, complete and ungrudging, and suffused by a glow of relief that a wrong had been righted... His life seemed in some measure a comforting morality play, in which Good triumphs over Evil.”⁶⁷

Evidenced by the continued efforts of historians to paint Hoover in a new light, Lyons’ claim did not hold any truth. Historians continued to reinterpret Hoover in the decades that followed, but for varying reasons. His reemergence always came at a time of economic recession, which signaled that neither the country, nor historians, had truly reinterpreted Hoover in their own minds.

After a relatively quiet 1970s Hoover reemerged during the latter years of the 1980s as a wealth of information poured into the public regarding the former president for a couple of reasons. First, as historian Martin L. Fausold pointed out, many works emerged a half-century after Hoover left the White House.⁶⁸ Second, and more importantly, Ronald Reagan, a conservative, now occupied the White House. Moreover, historian’s reinterpretation of Hoover came in large part due to President Reagan’s economic policies, at least on the surface.

The 1970s saw a rise in inflation and a deep postwar recession that lasted until the early years of Ronald Reagan’s presidency. Ronald Reagan, a conservative, entered the White House with the promise to cut taxes, minimize government spending, and reduce the deficit. He often spoke critically about the nations’ current economic crisis as he

⁶⁷ Eugene Lyons, *Herbert Hoover: A Biography*, 417.

⁶⁸ Martin L. Fausold, *The Presidency of Herbert C. Hoover*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985), 245.

declared, “government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.”⁶⁹ Reagan’s first order of business centered around fixing the nation’s ailing economy and reducing the size of the government. As he outlined in his Inaugural Address, much of Reagan’s economic recovery plan involved tax and budget cuts designed to balance the nation’s budget.

But what does Ronald Reagan and the 1980s have to do with a historical reinterpretation of Herbert Hoover? Most works on Herbert Hoover have been directly linked to times of economic downturn or depression; and during Reagan’s first term in office, specifically 1981-1983, a recession gripped the country. Ultimately, Reagan retooled his economic policies, abandoning the tax cuts, which led to a period of economic prosperity through the remainder of his second term. Reagan received a boost in his favorability as the economy improved, but many of the policies he enacted during the early years of his first term, specifically the recession, had been influenced in part by some of Hoover’s own economic philosophies during the Great Depression.⁷⁰

The books about Hoover in the 1980s tended to center on his presidency and attempted to recast him in a more hopeful light. Historian David Burner summarized this new approach to Hoover best when he wrote, “his life and thought bore upon the twentieth-century orderings of civilization, the newer collectivities within business, the economy, and public opinion that now supplement or replace the older groupings . . .

⁶⁹ Ronald Reagan, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981.

⁷⁰ Joseph M. Siracusa and David G. Coleman, *Depression to Cold War: A History of America From Herbert Hoover to Ronald Reagan*, (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002); Herbert Stein, “Pre-Revolutionary Fiscal Policy: The Regime of Herbert Hoover,” in *The Journal of Law & Economics* 9, (Oct., 1966), 189-223.

Hoover's understanding of the collective social life, and of the place the individual has within it, received much of its strength and its limitation from the milieu, and the successes, of his own career."⁷¹

This new interpretation prioritized Hoover's philosophies over his actual policies during his presidency. Ultimately more balanced than the previous interpretation, many of the 1980s works still suffered from an over glorification of Hoover's conservative ideals, particularly his philosophy of individualism as evidenced in Martin Fausold's book *The Presidency of Herbert C. Hoover*.⁷² Fausold's work, while not marred by overt claims that glorified Hoover, suffered most from a lack of criticism and focused the bulk of his attention on Hoover's surplus of optimism towards the American people and the country he called home.⁷³ Other historical works regarding Hoover around the decade suffered the same fate as Fausold's, including work by historian Gary Dean Best.⁷⁴ Best stated his book was largely based on Hoover's own words and actions, which must

⁷¹ David Burner, *Herbert Hoover: A Public Life*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), xi.

⁷² Martin L. Fausold, *The Presidency of Herbert C. Hoover*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985).

⁷³ Ibid., 14-19.

⁷⁴ Gary Dean Best, *Volume 1: Herbert Hoover: The Postpresidential Years, 1933-1964*, (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1983). See also: Frank T. Nye Jr., *Doors of Opportunity: The Life and Legacy of Herbert Hoover*, (West Branch: Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Association, Inc., 1988); Joan Hoff, *Herbert Hoover, Forgotten Progressive*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975); George Nash, *The Engineer, 1874-1914*, vol. 1 of *The Life of Herbert Hoover*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983); George Nash, *The Humanitarian, 1914-1917*, vol. 2 of *The Life of Herbert Hoover*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988); George Nash, *The Master of Emergencies*, vol. 3 of *The Life of Herbert Hoover*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996); Richard Norton Smith, *An Uncommon Man: The Triumph of Herbert Hoover*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

inherently be taken with a grain of salt.⁷⁵ While Hoover's own words lend thought behind many of his actions, he consistently believed in what he did even when his actions may not have yielded the intended outcome. With an emphasis placed on Hoover's ideals both socially and economically, the Right metaphorically reclaimed Hoover during what came to be known as the Age of Reagan.⁷⁶

As the Age of Reagan ensued, Hoover's reclamation seemed, at least on the surface, to be based solely on economic philosophies, but it was also due to the shift in attitude towards conservatism brought on by Ronald Reagan. Hoover's reclamation spoke more about Ronald Reagan's influence than it did Hoover's. The early years of Reagan's presidency were filled with many of the same economic philosophies, in particular tax cuts, that Hoover employed during his presidency. However, the two men had such drastically different personalities their comparisons began with a belief in conservatism and ended with their optimism towards the American people. Ever the modest type, Hoover was a quiet, often reserved man, who refused to flaunt his successes and wealth; while Reagan's presidency eschewed "the Carter era's cardigans and jeans, the Reagan's championed a new designer ethos."⁷⁷

A forgotten conservative in Herbert Hoover returned to relevancy because of this renewed optimism in conservatism and the country's future piloted by Ronald Reagan.

⁷⁵ Gary Dean Best, *Volume 1: Herbert Hoover: The Postpresidential Years, 1933-1964*, (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1983), xi.

⁷⁶ Gil Troy, "The Age of Reagan," *The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*, accessed March 17, 2017, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/essays/age-reagan>.

⁷⁷ Gil Troy, *Morning in American: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980's*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 56.

Although their presidencies varied drastically, their attitudes towards their country and their government ultimately brought Hoover back from irrelevancy. Hoover's undying optimism towards America culminated in his own ideology he dubbed American Individualism which relied on the individual to succeed with as little interference from government as possible. In a 1928 campaign speech Hoover described his view:

By adherence to the principles of decentralized self-government, ordered liberty, equal opportunity, and freedom to the individual, our American experiment in human welfare has yielded a degree of well-being unparalleled in the world. . . The greatness of America has grown out of a political and social system and a method of control of economic forces distinctly its own. . . which has carried this great experiment in human welfare farther than ever before in history.⁷⁸

Hoover's words echoed, at least in part, Reagan's political identity as "liberty-laden but moralistic, consumer-oriented but idealistic, nationalist but individualistic, and consistently optimistic." The shared sense of optimism and belief in the individual brought Hoover and Reagan together, but their pairing by historians lacked much substance beyond shared ideas. Their actions as president demonstrated their differences. Reagan was willing to compromise while Hoover, many times to a fault, stuck to his beliefs. According to some historians Reagan "was the greatest American president since Franklin D. Roosevelt . . . (he) restored many Americans' confidence in themselves and their country."⁷⁹ Hoover, on the other hand, had long

⁷⁸ Herbert Hoover, "Rugged Individualism" campaign speech, October 22, 1928.

⁷⁹ Gil Troy, *Morning in American: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980's*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5; Martin Anderson and Annelise Anderson, *Ronald Reagan: Decisions of Greatness*, (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2015), 1-8; This claim has also been substantiated by 2001, 2005, and 2011 Gallup Polls.

been, and continued to be considered one of the worst presidents in the nation's history.⁸⁰

The reinterpretation during the decade initially came out of Reagan's economic beliefs in taxation but ultimately became a result of his optimism and belief in the individual. Many historians from this period excluded the two men's vast differences in personality and elected to focus on ideas and attitudes rather than actual policy. Hoover became a canvas for many 1980s historians to reimagine in a new light with the reinvigoration of the conservative movement under President Reagan. It would not be until the 21st century that Hoover would spring forth again to be greeted by another economic recession.

In 2008, with the advent of an economic recession, another historical reinterpretation of Hoover began. Perhaps reinterpretation is the wrong term to use in this instance, rather Hoover was being reclaimed by the Right. A wealth of biographies appeared, and continue to appear, in the years following the 2008 recession that possessed a similar sentiment as those from the 1980s.⁸¹ Focused on Hoover's life work and his ideals, these works doubled down on his conservative roots and sought "to restore

⁸⁰ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Rating the Presidents: Washington to Clinton," in *Political Science Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1997), 179-190.

⁸¹ George H. Nash, *Freedom Betrayed: Herbert Hoover's Secret History of the Second World War and Its Aftermath*, (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2001); George H. Nash, *The Crusade Years, 1933-1955: Herbert Hoover's Lost Memoir of the New Deal Era and Its Aftermath*, (Stanford: Hoover Institute Press, 2013); Charles Rappleye, *Herbert Hoover in the White House: The Ordeal of the Presidency*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016); Glen Jeansonne, *Herbert Hoover: A Life*, (London: Penguin, 2016); William E. Leuchtenburg, *Herbert Hoover: The American Presidents Series: The 31st President, 1929-1933*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2009).

Hoover to a new generation as a person and as a leader... He presided over the nation in a time of crisis that may feel all too familiar.”⁸² Curiously missing was the mention of Hoover as president, but rather he was simply labeled a leader.

The 2008 reclamation of Hoover has been ironic for two reasons. First, many of the works sought to distance Hoover from the stigma he held from the Great Depression, the irony being that Hoover has only been reinterpreted or reclaimed by the political right at times of economic recession. Second, Hoover again became associated with Ronald Reagan despite having little in common. Despite their differences, Hoover and Reagan had become two of the most important conservatives of the 20th century. One historian referred to Hoover as “the single most important bearer of the torch of American conservatism between his own administration and that of Ronald Reagan,” even going so far as to claim without Hoover’s “principles, conscience, tenacity, and ideals” conservatism may have vanished.⁸³

Hoover had seemingly become a new politician. He had been elevated alongside Ronald Reagan based solely on his political intentions and ideology, not his actions. Painted as an example of what bureaucrats should strive to emulate, Hoover became a symbol for “government as a facilitator but not a director in the capitalist system” despite the fact he built what Charles Rappleye described as a “bureaucratic empire at the Department of Commerce.”⁸⁴ Many of the biographies after the 2008 recession openly

⁸² Charles Rappleye, *Herbert Hoover in the White House: The Ordeal of the Presidency*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016), xx.

⁸³ Glen Jeansonne, *Herbert Hoover: A Life*, (London: Penguin, 2016), 6.

⁸⁴ Charles Rappleye, *Herbert Hoover in the White House: The Ordeal of the Presidency*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016), xix.

acknowledged many of Hoover's own contradictions such as his tenure in the Commerce Department and the activist role he took in expanding government's involvement in the economic cycle and simply chose to ignore most of them.

Some of the alterations made to Hoover since he died have been curious but not without purpose. The two most recent reinterpretations of Hoover were spurred in part by Ronald Reagan, but they both came on the heels of economic recessions. With each new interpretation, Hoover's legacy looked a bit brighter. Historians disconnected him from the Great Depression more and more while inadvertently reinforcing the connection between Hoover and economic disparity due to the time of their publishing. Each of the previous reinterpretations provided some measure of redemption for the former president, but the two most recent raised more questions than they answered. Why had Hoover been resurrected from the ruins of the Great Depression? He was a man who succeeded at seemingly everything he attempted but was primarily only remembered for failing as president.

In part, the reinterpretations of Hoover have been part of what Jill Lepore described in her 2010 book *The White of Their Eyes*. In it she chronicled the rise of the Tea Party and their use of the past, particularly the American Revolution, to further their political agenda, often at the expense of historical accuracy. In the book Lepore wrote, "Historical fundamentalism is marked by the belief that a particular and quite narrowly defined past- 'the founding'-is ageless and sacred and to be worshipped."⁸⁵ Obviously,

⁸⁵ Jill Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 16.

Hoover was not part of the nation's founding; but he has been reinterpreted as a keeper of conservative values who "became the conscience of the GOP philosophy... a consistent champion of the conservative republican principles."⁸⁶ Historians used Hoover's ideals and massive humanitarian efforts to build him into a bastion of conservative values.

Hoover now sat next to Ronald Reagan. The picture historians have painted of Hoover today, while more well-rounded than any previous interpretation, still has its flaws and has failed to sway public memory in any meaningful way. The hard truth for Hoover's legacy remains his association with the Great Depression and no attempt by historians will change that.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Glen Jeansonne, *Herbert Hoover: A Life*, (London: Penguin, 2016), 6.

CHAPTER 3

HEBERT HOOVER PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY-MUSEUM GALLERY

There is an incredibly diverse array of museums around the world that it makes defining museums and their exhibits difficult. Presidential libraries have been a predominantly post World War II creation started under Franklin Roosevelt's administration. The original purpose of these libraries was for the housing of presidential papers and other members of the president's administration as outlined in FDR's statement to the press in 1938.¹ Presidential libraries changed the way in which presidents were commemorated. Per historian Ben Hufbauer, presidential libraries signaled the "dramatic increase in presidential authority that has occurred during an era when the United States has become the most powerful nation in the world."²

Every president since FDR has built and dedicated a presidential library. These libraries served a variety of purposes from education to commemoration. Natural tensions arose with these libraries because of how they are constructed. First, these structures are referred to as libraries, but their museum exhibitions are their main attractions making these structures more about commemoration than research or education. Presidential libraries, and their exhibitions by extension, are constructed and partially supported by a private foundation but run by the National Archives and Records Administration

¹ Franklin Delano Roosevelt, statement to the press, December 10, 1938.

² Benjamin Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples: How Memorials and Libraries Shape Public Memory*, 1.

(NARA), a federal institution. This relationship between public and private created a natural tension in the commemoration process between history and memory.³

One of the key issues with presidential commemoration is the tendency “to remember what is attractive and flattering and to ignore all the rest.”⁴ This phenomenon can be seen in more than presidential libraries, but they have certainly been some of the museum industries worst offenders. These library-museums exist in what historian Susan Crane described as “the remembered and lived experiences of untold numbers of many generations of visitors, museum professionals, and readers,” but served to fix the memory of cultures through their objects and exhibitions.⁵ These institutions were commemorations but their true purpose has been shrouded under the veil of education.

This chapter seeks to pull back the curtain on presidential libraries using the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum as a case study. By examining the institution’s museum exhibitions, a clear picture of the libraries true mission can be exposed. This chapter recounts the Hoover Library’s museum exhibition history from 1962 to the most recent renovation in 1992. Finally, this chapter provides an analysis of the museum’s current exhibition breaking down the tensions between history and memory.

³ Benjamin Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples: How Memorials and Libraries Shape Public Memory*, 1.

⁴ Michael Kammen, *In the Past Lane: Historical Perspectives on the American Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 214-224.

⁵ Susan A. Crane, introduction in *Museums and Memory*, ed. Susan A. Crane, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 2.

The library, originally intended as a place to research and view Herbert Hoover's papers, did contain a small exhibition. The first exhibit mainly consisted of the former President's papers. The exhibit included twenty display cases that housed documents from Hoover's collection. The exhibit exemplified the phrase "cabinets of curiosity" which described most early museums in America. The phrase defined museums as "collections of random and unconnected objects."⁶

Not designed with a particular audience in mind, the exhibit suffered from the randomness of many early history museums. Even as the museum opened its doors for the first-time, expansion plans for the building had already been planned. The museum underwent several changes throughout the next three decades until its most recent renovation in 1992. As the museum grew so did its permanent exhibition, not only in size and scope, but also technique. The original structure for the Hoover Library was designed by the Viggo M. Jensen Company out of Iowa City in 1959. The design of the building was simple. Hoover himself requested that the library not overshadow the Birthplace Cottage. With most of Hoover's memorabilia housed at the Hoover Institution at the time of the libraries initial construction, the original library was only a single-floor with little storage space. The structures original size aligned with its initial purpose: to display Hoover memorabilia, which mainly consisted of pictures. However, the library needed to expand to accommodate Hoover's decision to move his materials out of the Hoover

⁶ Gary Kulik, "Designing the Past," in *History Museums of the United States: A Critical Assessment*, ed. Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 5-6.

Institute to West Branch. Even before the library had officially been dedicated, an expansion was already in the works.⁷

During the 1970s, the museum encountered a period of near-constant fluctuation as the building and exhibition underwent renovations. Files and correspondences pertaining to the 1970s redesigns have been lost, so the motivation behind these exhibitions remains unknown. Only photographs of the two 1970s exhibits exist from 1971 and 1974, with little background information regarding either exhibition's main idea. However, the remaining photographs provided a glimpse at the different displays and their content. It is important to note throughout the decade the content of the exhibits did not change. The exhibitions followed the same content format, as each consisted of seven sections that chronicled Hoover's life. The 1971 exhibition suffered for a variety of reasons, chief among them the overwhelming amount of information presented. Stuck with the same problems as early history museums, the 1971 exhibition only survived three years before being remodeled in design only.

Redone in 1974, the exhibition attempted to follow the current museum trend: the interpretive exhibit. A product of the 1960s and 70s, this new form of exhibition sought to blend history with public education. The Hoover Libraries 1974 exhibition combined objects, labels, and lighting to present their version of Hoover's story. The museum's new exhibit lacked a clear purpose as it showcased a huge amount of information as well as objects. The exhibit served as a transition point for the museum towards a more

⁷ Frank T. Nye, Jr., *Doors of Opportunity: The Life and Legacy of Herbert Hoover*, (West Branch: Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Association, Inc., 1988), 275-276, 331.

modern exhibition style but still could not entirely shake old museum practices.

Reminiscent of George B. Goodes early Smithsonian exhibits that were “dense, cluttered affairs,” the Hoover exhibition of 1974 suffered from an overabundance of objects, materials, and labels. Goode tried to collect and display relics of national prominence with public education in the forefront, but his exhibitions largely consisted of “row on row of ‘glass-covered boxes of uniform size’ . . . arranged as space permitted.”⁸ The Hoover exhibition attempted to conform to museum trends of the 1970s but ended up with an exhibit somewhere between George B. Goode’s dense style and the interpretive style of the decade, but the lack of restraint with material also indicated the exhibition’s lack of a big idea that clarifies, limits, and focuses the exhibition’s scope and removing the only way in which to rate its success.⁹

After the near constant change of the previous decade the 1980s saw a period of stabilization for the museum’s exhibition as well as the grounds. However, by the end of the decade the museum began planning for a building renovation that included adding on more space as well as a complete exhibit overhaul. Curiously timed, the exhibit’s redesign came directly on the coat tails of historian’s reinterpretation of Hoover. Was this simply coincidence? The answer is definitively not, as illustrated in Display Masters, an exhibit design firm’s proposal, which stated, “With Socialism crumbling in Eastern Europe and our own welfare system not providing the help it promised, it is timely to

⁸ Gary Kulik, “Designing the Past,” in *History Museums of the United States: A Critical Assessment*, ed. Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 8-31.

⁹ Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* 2nd Ed., (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 7.

reexamine Hoover's ideas."¹⁰ Following suit with 1980s historians, the museum began the process of reinterpreting Hoover's life and policies for a new era.

With the museum's 1970s exhibit being of moderate size and large scope, the foundation and museum staff sought to tell a new story about Hoover. Planning for the new exhibit began in the closing years of the 1980s. Before the museum could start looking for a design firm, they first needed to plan the scope of the exhibit and decide on a story to tell. Unfortunately, there is no documentation of early planning meetings among the museum staff; but correspondences with design firms help to fill in those blanks. In a typed letter from Maureen Harding, the museum's former curator, to the prospective Deaton Museum Services, she asked several revealing questions. Chiefly she wondered how the design firm would handle the time period in which Hoover lived, how they would tell the story using chronology and themes, most importantly, how would they present Hoover in a new light that encapsulated his private and public personas?¹¹

Harding's questions revealed a lot about what the museum intended for its new exhibit. The first question revealed the scope of the exhibit to be quite broad encompassing different periods of Hoover's life. The second revealed the museum's desire to tell a specific story in a traditional, chronological fashion. The final questions provided insight into how the museum intended to portray the former President. The questions hinted at showcasing a more personal story about Hoover depicting him in the

¹⁰ Display Masters Preliminary Conceptual Master Plan, February 13, 1991, Box 3, Folder: Exhibit Design, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Museum Curatorial Files.

¹¹Maureen Harding, typed letter to Deaton Museum Services, 1990, Box 4, Folder: 1992 Renovation, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Museum Curatorial Files.

same light as the 1980s historians had done. As the museum attempted to paint Hoover in a new light, Harding referred to Hoover as a “god” in her letter to Deaton. The notion that Hoover was a hero of some sort marked the primary issue with presidential libraries: their tendency to confuse commemoration as education.

Further correspondences between Maureen Harding and other members of the museum staff revealed guidelines for choosing a design firm but at the same time highlighted the kind of exhibit the museum wanted. In her letter to members of the HHLP staff Harding listed a combined twenty-one positive and negative guidelines referring to them as “a damn good idea.” The positive guidelines for the design firm included things such as natural materials, neutral colors, easily-read labels, efficient use of space, adjusted atmospheres, observation space, and an “acceptance of history’s faults, mistakes, grief, and emotion. . . i.e. omission or avoidance of complex subjection (depression) doesn’t clarify anything.” Items included in the negative guidelines were no sleek or shiny laminates, bright colors, individual captions, long labels and panels, visual overload, uniform look, chairs, and serious subject matter getting glossed over.¹²

With the guidelines for choosing a design firm set, the museum held meetings with seven prospective firms. Ultimately, the museum signed a contract with Displaymasters out of Minneapolis and Abrams, Teller, and Madsen of Chicago on June 11, 1990. The contract stated Display Masters oversaw the exhibit installation while

¹² Maureen Harding, Letter to museum staff, February 1, 1990, Box 4, Folder: 1992 Renovation, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Museum Curatorial Files.

Abrams, Teller and Madsen managed design.¹³ With the design firms in place, construction on the new exhibit began.

As Abrams, Teller and Madsen began the design process they met with the museum's staff multiple times and submitted several proposals for approval. After several revised proposals, the museum staff finally approved of an exhibit that broke Hoover's life into sequential sections. The exhibition ultimately ended up with nine galleries which encompassed Hoover's entire life from West Branch to his death in New York City. The proposal included a rotunda which guests would walk through to enter the gallery. The rotunda would contain a "16-foot red granite map of the world and inserted in the floor are 57 brass sheaves of wheat – one in every nation where Hoover conducted relief efforts."¹⁴ The rotunda was added during the building expansion and serves "to focus visitors' attention on the many sides of Herbert Hoover—Engineer, Humanitarian, and Statesman—and to outline his impressive impact on people and nations through the multi-faceted roles he played in public life."¹⁵

¹³ Contract Agreement, pg. 1-7, June 11, 1990, Box 4, Folder: 1992 Renovation, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Museum Curatorial Files.

¹⁴ "Herbert Hoover Museum Permanent Galleries," National Archives and Records Administration, <https://hoover.archives.gov/exhibits/Hooverstory/index.html>.

¹⁵ Preliminary Conceptual Master Plan, February 13, 1991, Box 3: Folder: Exhibit Design, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Museum Curatorial Files.

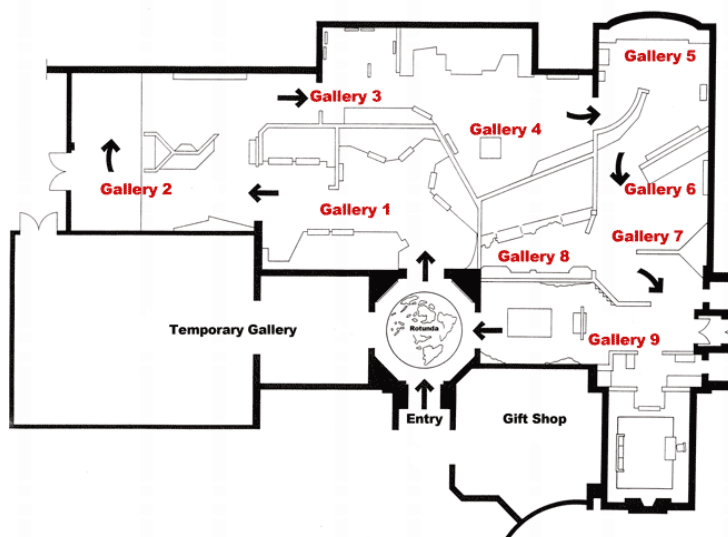


Figure 6: Floor map of the rotunda and nine exhibits in the museum's permanent gallery.

(Image courtesy of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library)

As shown in the picture above the museum is arranged in such a way that visitors are driven from one gallery to the next allowing Hoover's life story to be told sequentially. Each gallery represented a specific time in Hoover's life, and each gallery revealed another piece of the narrative in "The Hoover Story."¹⁶

The people behind the museum's permanent exhibit wanted to tell a specific story about Hoover, and each gallery provided evidence of that. The museum's permanent gallery proudly presented Hoover's many successes, but seemingly forgot about his faults, as they are simply not presented. Ultimately the museum attempted to portray him as a common man despite significant amounts of evidence to the contrary. The exhibition

¹⁶ The HHLP museum exhibit is simply titled "The Hoover Story."

had many of the same faults as the previous 1970s exhibitions, but was ultimately an upgrade in terms of narrative and presentation.



Figure 7: Years of Adventure Australia Exhibit (Photo courtesy of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum)

Before entering the museum's permanent gallery visitors are given the option to view a twenty-two-minute video about Hoover's life and the story presented during their museum tour. After the video visitors, must walk through a rotunda to enter "The Hoover Story" gallery. The rotunda was added as a part of the museum renovation in 1992 and marked the official beginning of the tour. The rotunda included "a 16-foot red granite map of the world and inserted in the floor are 57 brass sheaves of wheat – one in every nation where Hoover conducted relief efforts."¹⁷ The video and rotunda provided visitors with some sense of context before they entered the exhibit space.

¹⁷ HHLP, Herbert Hoover Museum Permanent Galleries, National Archives, accessed on March 2, 2017, <https://hoover.archives.gov/exhibits/Hooverstory/index.html>.

As visitors entered the permanent gallery they were greeted by the first display. The opening gallery sought “to provide a memorable introduction to Herbert Hoover and a philosophical background which can give insight to his later actions.”¹⁸ This display took aim at Hoover’s years as a boy through his career as a mining engineer. The title of the display, “Years of Adventure”, was taken directly from the first volume of Hoover’s memoirs.¹⁹ Much of the first gallery was based on information from that book. This section “sets the stage for the rest of the exhibit by indicating how Hoover’s values were shaped through his Iowa Quaker upbringing. We can see where his beliefs in hard work, independence, thrift, tolerance, individual responsibility, democracy, tempered materialism, and concern for the environment, his neighbors, and the world began.”²⁰

The exhibit highlighted Hoover’s mining career abroad in Australia and his experiences with Lou Henry in China. The exhibit gave visitors a sense of Hoover’s upbringing and how it informed many of his philosophies later in life. One reoccurring theme in this first part of the exhibit remained Hoover’s Quaker upbringing. Visitors certainly got a sense that Hoover’s Quaker roots were important, but the museum mistakenly assumed its’ visitors know what Quakerism was all about. Perhaps an individual may have surmised some meaning from the labels that accompany the display, but a clear definition is nowhere to be found. This may have been done on purpose, as defining American Quakers has been difficult since the nineteenth century. As historian

¹⁸ Abrams, Teller and Madsen, Inc., exhibit content proposal, pg. 1, 1991.

¹⁹ Herbert Hoover, *The Herbert Hoover Memoirs: Years of Adventure, 1874-1920*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1951).

²⁰ Abrams, Teller and Madsen, Inc., exhibit content proposal, pg. 1, 1991.

Thomas Hamm argues, “generalization about American Quakers today is almost impossible,” but he argues a set of shared beliefs based on worship, ministry, Quaker business practices, simplicity and education.²¹

Herbert Hoover’s roots to Iowa are unavoidable and got mentioned immediately. The museum credited his time in Iowa for igniting his passion for fishing as “the Wapsinonoc Creek yielded fish to anyone with a willow pole, butcher string line, and the patience instilled by Quaker discipline.”²² The museum’s treatment of Hoover’s Iowa childhood spent most of its time simply painting Hoover as a young, Quaker boy who enjoyed fishing and the outdoors. Interestingly, Hoover, nor the museum, credited his time in Iowa for shaping his views on self-reliance, a major part of his political ideology. Rather, the focus of his time in Iowa revolved around his Quaker upbringing and “tenets of emotional self-containment and a commitment to worldly success matched by obligations of service to others.” Interestingly his time spent in Oregon after his parent’s death taught him self-reliance and gave him the drive “to be able to earn my own living, without the help of anybody, anywhere.”²³

The museum brushed over his childhood relatively quickly. The issue here arose with the museum’s insistence on constantly reminding viewers throughout the remainder of the galleries that Hoover hailed from Iowa and that played a significant role in the man

²¹ Thomas D. Hamm, *The Quakers in America*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 204); 64.

²² HHLP, Years of Adventure: An Iowa Boyhood Exhibit, National Archives, accessed on January 21, 2017, <https://hoover.archives.gov/exhibits/Hooverstory/gallery01/index.html>.

²³ HHLP, Years of Adventure: Oregon, National Archives, accessed January 23, 2017, <https://hoover.archives.gov/exhibits/Hooverstory/gallery01/index.html>.

he became. Perhaps this insistence on Hoover's Iowa roots was part of historian Jon Lauck's proposal that to end the neglect of Midwesterners and their history, "Midwestern historians will need to explain why the Midwest matters to the broader course of American history."²⁴

The rest of the exhibit charted Hoover's time at Stanford and abroad in Australia and China. During these years, Hoover garnered a reputation as an outstanding mining engineer. He traveled across the globe serving as an adviser for struggling mining operations and earning the nickname "The Chief". As Hoover's time in Australia dwindled, he married his Stanford sweetheart Lou Henry and immediately following their wedding Bert and Lou set out for China.

One of the first scenes depicted came from Australia which found Hoover seated behind a desk surrounded by mining equipment. Depicted wearing a bucket hat and smoking a pipe, the image of Hoover conjured up visions of an exhausted Midwesterner after a hard day's work. The depiction of Hoover is packaged in a way to warrant a connection to his past and his upbringing in Iowa. The image is presented to say as much about Hoover as it is about a memory of Midwest life long past. The quiet strength of the Midwesterner was on full display. The museum advertised the Midwest through Hoover

²⁴ Jon K. Lauck, *The Lost Region: Toward a Revival of Midwestern History*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013), 7.

to connect with its visitors; to make the Midwest persona visible “as a nostalgic, bucolic past.”²⁵

After Hoover’s time in Australia came to an end, he and Lou Henry married and set out for China. Interestingly, the focus of the China exhibit centered on Lou Henry. Immediately viewers are drawn to the replica of a cannon symbolizing the Boxer Rebellion. Unfortunately, Bert and Lou Henry’s involvement in the rebellion went mostly untold. The exhibit used a diverse mix of objects that ranged from a dress Lou Henry wore to pottery she collected. The exhibit looked very much like an introduction to Lou Henry with many of the major artifacts and displays centered on her, but the labels are mostly about Hoover and his growing reputation as a mining engineer.

Disappointingly put together, the exhibit could not seem to decide what narrative to follow and failed to deliver a solid introduction to Lou Henry. The display used depictions of scenes from Herbert and Lou Henry’s early years together to “give people a sense of what would happen if you were transported back into those worlds,” according to former museum director Tim Walch.²⁶ The museum said a lot about Lou Henry and her role without actually saying much at all. As Barbara Melosh wrote, “. . . selections

²⁵ Mary Neth, “Seeing the Midwest with Peripheral Vision,” in *The Identity of the American Midwest: Essays on Regional History*, ed. Andrew R.L. Clayton and Susan E. Gray (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 45-46.

²⁶ Phil Hersh, “New Image for Hoover may be just around the corner,” *The Chicago Tribune*, June 7, 1992.

and omissions reveal much about professionalism and patronage in the shaping of popular historical understanding.”²⁷ The maltreatment of Lou Henry only continued.



Figure 8: The Humanitarian Years gallery (Photo courtesy of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum)

The next exhibit in the gallery continued the trend of using Hoover’s memoirs to craft the exhibit narrative and “portray the scope of the Great Humanitarian’s efforts to prevent the starvation of millions.”²⁸ After Hoover’s successful foray as a mining engineer he became increasingly more involved in politics. However, it remained unclear whether Hoover would have sought a career in public life if World War I had not forced his hand. With thousands of Americans stranded in Europe with little or no money and a

²⁷ Barbara Melosh, “Speaking of Women: Museums’ Representations of Women’s History,” in *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment*, ed. Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 183.

²⁸ Abrams, Teller and Madsen, Inc., exhibit content proposal, pg. 2, 1991, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Curator Files, Box 4, Folder: Exhibit Proposals.

slim chance of returning home, Hoover answered a call to aid in the evacuation of these stranded Americans. Drawing from his multitude of experiences as a mining engineer he quickly pulled together money for loans as English hotels refused American dollars. Brushed over relatively quickly are Hoover's efforts to relieve over 100,000 Americans stranded in Europe when WWI began despite the logistics of the whole operation.

The exhibit continued to play with Hoover's Quaker upbringing as the first label reads, "Bored with making money, the Quaker side of Herbert Hoover yearned to be of service to others."²⁹ The exhibits claim held no weight as Hoover never directly mentioned his Quaker upbringing as the impetus to serve and aid others. Rather, in his memoir Hoover repeatedly talked about the love for his country and fellow countrymen. Illustrating this point Hoover wrote:

Every homecoming was an inspiration. I found always a more spontaneous kindness, a greater neighborliness, a greater sense of individuality, a far deeper sense of equality, a lesser poverty, a greater comfort and security, and above all, a wider spread of education, a wider freedom of spirit and a wider confidence of every parent in the unlimited future of his children than in any other country in the world.³⁰

Hoover's drive to help the Americans stuck in Europe was in no doubt in part driven by his upbringing as a Quaker, but to what extent remained unknown.

The main display in this second exhibit centered on Hoover's largest humanitarian work: the relief of Europe throughout WWI. Little mention was made of the inner workings of the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB) and for good

²⁹ HHLP, The Humanitarian Years, National Archives, accessed on February 7, 2017, <https://hoover.archives.gov/exhibits/Hooverstory/gallery02/index.html>.

³⁰ Herbert Hoover, *Years of Adventure, 1874-1920*, 124-25.

reason; it was never that interesting. At first Hoover hesitated to accept a position as the head of the CRB, but received approval from his fellow business partners; so he accepted President Wilson's offer. Ultimately Hoover and the CRB succeeded in feeding over ten million people in Europe, saving thousands of lives in the process.

The exhibit centered on a vast array of decorated flour sacks and other pieces of art given to Hoover by the people he aided. "The Humanitarian Years" was the most substantial exhibit in the gallery. The gifts conveyed the sense of appreciation and gratitude from the people of Europe. Depicting the events from Hoover's point of view, the exhibit lost some of the hardship and emotion of the people of Europe. The exhibit used a Belgian warehouse façade to display the exhibits objects. The exhibit succeeded in building Hoover up into the hero of the situation highlighted by the works of art created by Belgians and other Europeans eventually gifted to Hoover.

The pieces of art displayed were beautiful but confused the museum's message. The sense of desperation and sorrow that people of Europe felt during and after the war was pushed aside in favor of casting Hoover as the hero. The sense of gratitude for Hoover's service was lost among the decorated flour sacks replaced by the wonder of how the people of Europe created such beautiful works of art in such a difficult time. Hoover deserved credit for his humanitarian efforts, but the man did not feed Europe alone. Thousands of people aided in the relief effort that sadly went unmentioned. Herein arose one of the issues with presidential libraries and their affinity to give more credit than they should.

Included in this issue was the museum's casting of Hoover as the hero. Certainly, the main orchestrator of the relief effort, Hoover was one man amongst thousands that aided in the effort. Throughout the course of the war Britain, France, the United States, and hosts of other nations provided \$927,681,484.98 worth of subsidies for the purchase of food and supplies.³¹ Hardly the one-man operation the museum would have visitors believe.

"The Humanitarian Years" deviated from the sequential narrative style used previously by including both of Hoover's humanitarian efforts after World War I & II. An odd choice for the museum to make as Hoover's efforts after World War II helped to bring about a measure of redemption for the former president. His World War II relief efforts got mentioned again in a later exhibit but they are brushed over relatively quickly. The exhibit would be best served to keep his relief efforts separate and explain the importance of each as they pertained to his legacy.

³¹ Herbert Hoover, *The Herbert Hoover Memoirs: Years of Adventure, 1874-1920*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1951), 170.



Figure 9: The Roaring Twenties gallery (Photo courtesy of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum)

The 1920s played a crucial part in the American story and the country's development. With new technologies and temptations abound, society changed drastically. Urban areas became the major population centers, prohibition and jazz were in, and technology changed the American lifestyle. The gallery portrayed “some of the enormous changes that took place in sports, literature, technology, communications, and other areas of American life during the 1920s.”³² The gallery made almost no mention of Hoover which begged the question: why was this gallery included? The simple answer would be for context and the upbeat nature of the exhibit transitioned from the end of WWI to the beginning of Hoover’s time as Secretary of Commerce.

³² HHLP, The Roaring Twenties, National Archives, accessed on February 5, 2017, <https://hoover.archives.gov/exhibits/Hooverstory/gallery03/index.html>.

Mentioned in the exhibit were the likes of Babe Ruth, Hollywood, the amount of tennis balls purchased each month by Americans, and the shortening of women's skirts. These provided relatively little meaning or worth to Hoover's life or legacy. The gallery served as a transition from the dour end of WWI to the cultural boom that encapsulated the 1920s. Using mostly pictures, the gallery showcased the technological and cultural shifts that occurred within the US over the decade that Hoover happily embraced as Secretary of Commerce. Rather than place Hoover within the 1920s, the gallery ignored him all together.

The depiction of the 1920s centered on American popular culture and all of the cultural changes that occurred during the decade. The decade can be characterized "as an era of apolitical individualism, an era of business culture, hedonism and political retreat, the period can more accurately be seen as an era of cultural renaissance created. . . over ideas about the past and the possibilities of the future." The 1920s remained a unique period in US history because of the "combination of despair and possibility."³³

³³ Susan Currell, *American Culture in the 1920s*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2009), 2.



Figure 10: The Wonder Boy exhibit from the HHLP permanent gallery (photo courtesy of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum)

With the end of WWI many people wondered what Hoover would do next. After aiding President Wilson during the end of the war Hoover's political identity remained unclear. Many thought him a Wilsonian Democrat after his support for the Versailles Treaty and the potential Democratic candidate for the presidency in 1920. Despite Hoover's popularity among the American people he was far from desirable for many among the two major political parties. With a short-lived contemplation for the presidential nomination in 1920, Hoover ultimately accepted an offer from President Warren Harding to serve as Secretary of Commerce.

The nation expected very little from the Secretary of Commerce, but by the end of Hoover's term the "themeless hodgepodge became the most dynamic agency in Washington", having created new agencies and even writing a uniform highway safety code for the entire country. Ever the progressive, Hoover's time as Secretary of

Commerce may have been the most impressive chapter of his life. He pushed for industrial standardization on products that ranged from milk bottles to plumbing, eliminated waste, and increased efficiency wherever possible. Remnants of his innovations as Secretary of Commerce remain visible today. No one need look further than the Hoover Dam, a beacon to Hoover's time in the Commerce Department and his insistence on progress and efficiency.

"The Wonder Boy" could be the most interesting gallery in the exhibit. Certainly, the most visually stimulating, the gallery depicted Hoover seated at his desk surrounded by many of the technological advancements he pushed for as Commerce Department Secretary. Designed to show off Hoover's accomplishments as Secretary of Commerce, the exhibit became too cluttered for its message to shine through.

The content and labels exemplified Hoover's belief in organization, efficiency and individualism. It seemed Hoover had a hand in everything during the 1920s as he earned the title "'Secretary of Everything,'" from the newspapers³⁴. His time as Secretary of Commerce strengthened his belief in the individual and became a "training ground for Hoover's vision of a society always advancing through individual enterprise and warmhearted cooperation." Building up to the 1928 Presidential election "The Wonder Boy" served to further build Hoover as a man always looking forward and a man loved by the world.³⁵

³⁴ Charles Rappleye, *Herbert Hoover in the White House: The Ordeal of the Presidency*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 11.

³⁵ HHLP, *The Hoover Story: The Wonder Boy*, National Archives, accessed on February 10, 2017, <https://hoover.archives.gov/exhibits/Hooverstory/gallery04/index.html>.

Contained in this gallery were some interesting word choices and phrases that have been spun to depict Hoover in a specific light. The title of the gallery originally referred to President Coolidge's somewhat flippant nickname for Hoover that was not meant as a compliment. Additionally, his activist approach did not endear him to his fellow cabinet members or politicians which earned him the nickname "Secretary of Commerce and Under Secretary of all other departments." As Charles Rappleye explained, "His bureaucratic claim-jumping grated on his fellow cabinet members."³⁶ Hoover's successes became part of the reason that many in his own party opposed him for the presidential nomination in 1928, but that conveniently got left out of the exhibit in order to paint Hoover as a unanimously popular individual that no one could possibly oppose.

³⁶ Charles Rappleye, *Herbert Hoover in the White House: The Ordeal of the Presidency*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 12.



Figure 11: The Logical Candidate Gallery (Photo courtesy of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum)

“Who But Hoover?” the museum asked. The 1928 election arrived, and Hoover had garnered an incredibly favorable reputation not just within the US but around the world. Despite some opposition against Hoover’s “activist approach” within the Republican Party, he won the nomination and squared off against New York Governor Alfred E. Smith. Framed as East Versus West Branch, the gallery played on Hoover’s rural, small-town roots. Despite the Democrats’ attempt to paint Hoover as a radical, the people of the nation spoke, giving 58 percent of the vote to the former Secretary of Commerce.³⁷

³⁷ John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, “Election of 1928,” *The American Presidency Project*, accessed on April 19, 2017, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/showelection.php?year=1928>.

The first year of the new administration got off to a fast and furious start as Hoover sought to further many of the ideas he started as Secretary of Commerce. Fighting for the struggling agricultural sector became a priority for Hoover as he established the Federal Farm Board. The President continued to strengthen the nation's infrastructure as he enacted tax cuts for lower income Americans, prison reform programs, and created the Veterans Administration along with veterans' hospitals. In the tradition of Teddy Roosevelt, Hoover demonstrated himself to be a product of the Progressive Era. Historian David Kennedy wrote of Hoover, "The progressives of Theodore Roosevelt's day were a varied lot. . . but they shared a commitment . . . to substitute mastery for drift, or, as Hoover might have put it, social planning for laissez-faire; a commitment, in short, to use government as an agency of human welfare."³⁸

Designed to shed light on the man, not the politician, the exhibit encompassed time with his family and "Medicine Ball Cabinet." The exhibit provided the first real glance at the kind of man the President was outside of his accomplishments. Previous exhibits offered little more than a depiction of Hoover as a larger than life figure who amassed enormous wealth, saved Europe, and ascended into public office as a man beloved by all. "The Logical Candidate" sought to provide a degree of relatability for visitors but metaphorically sanded off some of Hoover's rough edges. He "was a kindly enough man in person and to his friends, but in the capacity of his office he was surly,

³⁸ David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 33.

easily frustrated, and sometimes vindictive . . . profoundly shy. . . Hoover wondered if he were up to the task.”³⁹

“The Logical Candidate” included a variety of photographs of Hoover during various times throughout the 1928 campaign and during his time as President. Despite the abundant amount of photographs the display centered on a video recap of Hoover’s campaign victory. A relatively small exhibit in terms of space and content, the display unintentionally mirrored his time in office. In fairness, Hoover had little chance to focus on much besides the depression during his four years as President; but the display lacked much of the substance provided by previous exhibits. Humanizing the president evoked a sense of relatability and empathy for the viewer which served the museum’s purpose well; but their portrayal of Hoover as a steady, sure-footed man ran contradictory to the truth, at least in the case of his political career. In the museum’s attempt to humanize the former president they made him far less interesting and harder to sympathize with.

³⁹ Charles Rappleye, *Herbert Hoover in the White House: The Ordeal of the Presidency*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), xvi.



Figure 12: The Great Depression gallery (photo represents only a portion of the gallery)

“The Great Depression” was undoubtedly one of the most disappointing exhibits in the entire gallery. The worst economic crisis in the nation’s history “The Great Depression” gallery put the Great Depression in historical context and details Hoover's early responses to the crisis.”⁴⁰ The exhibit offered viewers little more than a glimpse into the start of the depression and shied away from addressing the elephant in the room. The Great Depression ruined Hoover’s legacy for decades and continues to plague public memory today. Instead of addressing the perception of Hoover during his presidency and how it was affected by the depression, the museum focused on economic principles and the debate among economists over what caused the depression. That debate remains about as unclear today as it did when the exhibit was planned and installed. However,

⁴⁰ HHLP, The Hoover Story: The Great Depression, National Archives, accessed on February 21, 2017, <https://hoover.archives.gov/exhibits/Hooverstory/gallery06/index.html>.

historians and economists have come to a general consensus: World War I was a principle cause.⁴¹

Many books written during Hoover's presidency faulted the President for causing the depression and questioned his leadership ability. In the heart of the depression a multitude of books appeared by authors, many who possessed ties to the Democratic National Committee, who attempted to conjure up ill will towards Hoover.⁴² These books included passages personally attacking the President and labeled him incompetent, petty, and ignorant.⁴³ While these books are not written by historians, they depicted the animosity toward Hoover while in office but the way in which Hoover responded to their claims revealed as much about him as the men who wrote them.

The Great Depression brought forth harsh attitudes toward the President but more importantly it revealed Hoover "to be hapless and inept as president."⁴⁴ He launched a campaign to refute claims against his credibility despite their exaggerated nature due to

⁴¹ Charles Rappleye, *Herbert Hoover in the White House: The Ordeal of the Presidency*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016); Martin L. Fausold, *The Presidency of Herbert C. Hoover*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985); Harris Gaylord Warren, *Herbert Hoover and The Great Depression*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959); David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁴² Clement Wood, *Herbert Clark Hoover: An American Tragedy*, (New York: Michael Swain, 1932); Walter Liggett, *The Rise of Herbert Hoover*, (New York: The H.K. Fly Company, 1932); John M. Hamill, *The Strange Career of Mr. Hoover Under Two Flags* (New York: W. Faro, Incorporated, 1931); John Knox, *The Great Mistake*, (Washington D.C.: 1930); James J. O'Brien, *Hoover's Millions and How He Made Them*, (New York: James J. O'Brien Publishing Co., 1932)

⁴³ Robert S. Allen, *Why Hoover Faces Defeat*, (New York: Brewer, Warren & Putnam, 1932), 8.

⁴⁴ Charles Rappleye, *Herbert Hoover in the White House: The Ordeal of the Presidency*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), xvii.

“his relative political inexperience, his sensitive nature, and the intensely loyal men with whom he surrounded himself.”⁴⁵ Hoover proved an efficient engineer but an inexperienced politician. His inexperience served him well in the 1928 election but caused him headaches in office. Historian Charles Rappleye wrote, “Through a curious combination of arrogance and personal pique he managed to turn much of his own party against him.”⁴⁶ The presidency revealed the worst in Herbert Hoover, and the Great Depression cemented his shortcomings into history.

Even as Secretary of Commerce Hoover saw signs of economic downturn on the horizon but when elected he did very little to address those concerns until after the initial stock market crash. The museum explained Hoover’s actions in the early months of the depression that succeeded in stemming the tide of the economic downturn but stopped there. Historian Harris Gaylord Warren summarized Hoover’s belief that “the federal government must help the people, but the people must bear the burden and not expect miracles.”⁴⁷ His reaction to the initial crash generally informed of his policies throughout the depression and his belief in the limited role of government. “The Great Depression” missed a huge opportunity to address Hoover’s faults and provide him with some humanity, just as the museum had previously with “The Logical Candidate.”

One of the most glaring issues with this exhibit and the next was the way in which they were constructed and presented. Clearly divided into two separate exhibits by the

⁴⁵ Rosanna, Sizer, “Herbert Hoover and the Smear Books, 1930-1932,” *The Annals of Iowa* 47, 1984, 343-344.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, xvi-xvii.

⁴⁷ Harris Gaylord Warren, *Herbert Hoover and The Great Depression*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 114.

museum, they looked like one larger one. This exhibit would have been better served by combining it into one large gallery with a single narrative. This gallery aimed to provide context and provide a cause for the depression while the next exhibit examined the effects on Hoover.



Figure 13: Living in the White House gallery

Included in this gallery was another display titled “Living in the White House.” Filled with a variety of Hoover’s memorabilia and an assortment of pictures from his and Lou Henry’s years in the White House, the display added no value to the overall story the museum tried to tell. Even the previous Museum Director, Richard Norton Smith, was unhappy with the second half of the exhibit as illustrated in a letter to designer Alan Teller when he wrote, “the extraordinary creativity and imagination lavished on the first half of the museum design seemed to wane as we moved into the presidency and beyond.

You can see it in the flat presentation within cases and on walls.”⁴⁸ This exhibit harkened back to George B. Goode’s early, cluttered Smithsonian displays.⁴⁹



Figure 14: From Hero to Scapegoat Gallery (Photo courtesy of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum)

Much of the museum up to this point in the gallery had not presented such a one-sided story meant to expunge Hoover of fault. In “From Hero to Scapegoat” the museum addressed the public shift in attitude towards the president. As described on the museum’s website, “It was Hoover’s fate as president to cope with the greatest crisis since the Civil War. In the process, he sacrificed much of his reputation as a hero.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Richard Norton Smith, letter to Alan Teller, March 22, 1993, Box 3, Folder: 1992 Renovation, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Museum Curatorial Files.

⁴⁹ Gary Kulik, “Designing the Past,” in *History Museums of the United States: A Critical Assessment*, ed. Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 9-10.

⁵⁰ HHLP, From Hero to Scapegoat Gallery, *National Archives*, accessed February 17, 2017, <https://hoover.archives.gov>.

First, Hoover did not sacrifice his status, at least not willingly. He simply could not figure out how to stop the depression, and it cost him dearly with the American people.

Hoover's response to the depression came as a product of his thinking. He believed in individualism, but a brand that was entirely his own. David Kennedy summarized, "His ideal individualism was, rather, communal and cooperative, arising from a faith in the better self of each citizen. The chief role of government was to articulate and orchestrate the aspirations of these better selves and to provide the information as well as the means for them to come together."⁵¹

The museum did a nice job presenting the nation's discontent with Hoover but shied away from making any overt judgements of him. The museum offered one critique that "Hoover's failure to dramatize himself was his greatest strength as a humanitarian and his greatest flaw as a politician" but never stopped to ask if Hoover was a good politician to begin with?⁵² Historians failed to properly address Hoover's inadequacies until recently, despite his own reservations about politics and his lack of a "politician's manner."⁵³

As the stock market crashed in October 1929, Hoover proved his inability to be an effective political leader with the Hawley-Smoot Tariff that called for higher duties on imports. The ordeal showed Hoover "utterly unable to control the tariff legislation,"; and

⁵¹ David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 47.

⁵² HHLP, The Hoover Story: From Hero to Scapegoat, National Archives, accessed February 17, 2017, <https://hoover.archives.gov>.

⁵³ Charles Rappleye, *Herbert Hoover in the White House: The Ordeal of the Presidency*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 13.

worse, even his most ardent supporters started to doubt him. “Ominously,” wrote David Kennedy, “the Great Engineer was showing himself to be a peculiarly artless politician.”⁵⁴

“The Great Depression” and “From Hero to Scapegoat” exhibits connected with their subject matter, but the museum did a poor job interjecting Hoover into the depression. The museum spent so much time humanizing Hoover in “The Logical Candidate” showing a personal side to the President but replaced that image with one of the aloof President who seemed unfettered by the struggles of the very people who elected him. Narratively the exhibit addressed the fact that the depression was no fault of Hoover’s, but rather a variety of factors, but it failed to place any blame or criticism on Hoover. Hoover was a flawed man and more importantly a mediocre politician. The museum shied away from Hoover’s shortcomings and instead exonerated him of any political missteps in favor of turning him into the victim of the depression.

⁵⁴ David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 50.



Figure 15: An Uncommon Woman Gallery (photo courtesy of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum)

Clearly the museum could not decide what to do with Lou Henry throughout the entirety of the gallery. She popped in and out of exhibitions and was weaved into Hoover's narrative as a background character rather than a person with her own unique story. Understandably so as the museum served to tell Herbert Hoover's story; but the museum missed out on an opportunity to showcase Lou Henry in her own right. Despite this, the museum dedicated one its galleries in service of the First Lady; but unsurprisingly she became one dimensional.

The placement of Lou Henry's gallery interrupted the narrative flow of the previous exhibits that dealt exclusively with the former President and the depression. The exhibit squeezed her life into one exhibit, and the museum struggled to provide much depth to Lou Henry as a result. The museum seemingly only chose stories about Lou Henry that corresponded with some of the most enthralling moments of Herbert's life

outside of her involvement with the Girl Scouts. The treatment of Lou Henry made her little more than a pop-up character that served to enrich the narrative of Bert's life.

Visitors are greeted by a depiction of Lou Henry working with a Girl Scout holding a plate of cookies. Lou Henry was heavily involved in the Girl Scouts and helped to drastically expand the organization until her death. The museum is aiming to depict Lou Henry in the same fashion of her husband. The exhibit is appropriately titled "An Uncommon Woman" which rang true.

The space in which this exhibit was constructed does not do much to entice visitors into the space. Looking at the floor layout (Figure 1) of the museum the Lou Henry exhibition was tucked away much like the "From Hero to Scapegoat" exhibition. The museum chose a few interesting stories about Lou Henry to tell in her exhibit, but ultimately she was framed within the context of her husband's life. Unfortunately, Lou Henry's legacy had been intertwined with her husband's; and she has gone largely unrecognized throughout history despite being part of "a new breed of woman, nurtured in the nineteenth-century concept that woman's chief role was as wife and mother, but redefining that role in a way that drew them out of the home and into the community."⁵⁵

Most profound in "An Uncommon Woman" was the museum's insistence that Lou Henry was a progressive woman of the age, but it never connected her life to Hoover's in any way other than the obvious fact they were married. Women had long been absent in museums until a resurgence of the women's movement in the 1970s. The

⁵⁵ Anne Beiser Allen, *Independent Woman Vol. 188: The Life of Lou Henry Hoover*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 2

Lou Henry exhibit came as a byproduct of the era and sought to give context to her public life as historians of the decade reconsidered women's roles. The Lou Henry exhibition provided an opportunity to tell her story but raised the question: where was she in all the other exhibits? The nature of the Lou Henry exhibit indirectly emphasized that "women were everywhere secondary" despite the fact she was well-educated, well-traveled, and accomplished more than most men of her era.⁵⁶



Figure 16: Counselor to the Republic Gallery (photo courtesy of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum)

The final exhibit in the gallery focused on Hoover's time after his presidency. After the interjection of Lou Henry's gallery, Hoover's story picked back up. Centered on

⁵⁶ Barbara Melosh, "Speaking of Women: Museums' Representations of Women's History" in *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment*, ed. Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 183-197.

a re-creation of Hoover's Waldorf Towers living room suite in New York, the exhibit picked up right after the presidential election in 1932 in which Hoover was soundly beaten by FDR. The visual recreation of the suite made no sense as far as the overall narrative was concerned. Hoover lived in this suite after his presidency, and did work from there, but that had little bearing on the narrative the museum had used until this point. The years that followed his presidency saw Hoover blamed for the depression while he actively opposed the new administration through speeches and publications.⁵⁷ It was not until the end of WWII and the death of FDR that Hoover began to mend his reputation with the help of President Harry Truman. FDR showed up sparingly in the museum's labels, through quotations but the two men's relationship went unexplored, and for good reason, as Hoover and Roosevelt shared little affection for one another after the depression.

Truman extended an invitation to the former President to once again aid in the relief of Europe to which Hoover obliged. Hoover became embedded in public life as President Truman tasked Hoover with reorganizing the federal government's executive branch so it operated more efficiently. Known as the Hoover Commission the former president shaped a more powerful, expansive presidency.⁵⁸ Hoover became an adviser for

⁵⁷ Herbert Hoover, *The Challenge to Liberty*, (New York: Scribner, 1934); Herbert Hoover, *American Ideals versus the New Deal*, (New York: Scribner, 1936); Herbert Hoover, *America's Way Forward*, (New York: Scribner, 1938); Herbert Hoover, *Shall We Send Our Youth to War?*, (New York: Coward-McCann, 1939).

⁵⁸ Peri E. Arnold, "The First Hoover commission and the Managerial Presidency," in *The Journal of Politics* 38, no. 1 (1976): 48-49.

future Presidents and by the time of his death had earned back much of the public goodwill that had been lost decades prior.

Cluttered with a huge amount of material “Counselor to the Republic” suffered from lack of focus. The final exhibit covered almost thirty years of material in a single display, and the narrative faded away among all the pictures and labels. The Waldorf Tower façade to the overwhelming amount of material made this exhibit difficult to understand but the most glaring aspect remained the galleries ending. Rather than simply ending the gallery on Hoover’s redemption, the museum made a curious decision and ended the tour with a depiction of Hoover fly-fishing (figure 12).



Figure 17: Herbert Hoover Fishing

The museum galleries attempted to tell the life story of Herbert Hoover and recast him in a new light. Using nine exhibits to tell his story became a problem for the museum as their narrative and depiction of Hoover was inconsistent. The museum struggled to grapple with Hoover’s Quaker faith as it seemed to conveniently appear in labels for his

humanitarian efforts but then completely disappeared for the rest of the exhibit. Most glaring, the museum wanted Hoover to be seen as a common man because of his humble upbringing; but his life story, and subsequently the museum's story, directly contradicted that notion.

The museum served as a reintroduction to Hoover for many visitors, and on that level the museum does not disappoint as evidenced by the museum's Trip Advisor page. A quick scroll through the reviews revealed that most visitors enjoyed the museum and found it to be very educational and eye-opening. Many visitors remarked on their lack of knowledge of the former President and were surprised at all of the things he did during his life, often leaving with a newfound respect for the man. A Cedar Rapids woman summed up her visit as well as many others, writing, "History has not treated President Hoover well but his library embodies who the man truly was."⁵⁹ Despite many of the museum galleries' flaws, it's target audience clearly received the message.

"The Hoover Story" galleries were far from perfect with a variety of narrative and design issues that do not always flow seamlessly together. The museum provided a traditional visitor experience, meaning the institution "provides content for visitors to consume" rather than providing "multi-directional content."⁶⁰ Today, "The Hoover Story" suffers from being old and relying heavily on Hoover's own writings to craft its narrative. The museum wanted to show visitors a different side of the former President outside of public memory. "The Hoover Story" would be well-served to include the

⁵⁹ Trip Advisor, "Yvonne B. Review," July 7, 2016, accessed on January 23, 2017.

⁶⁰ Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, (Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010), 2-3.

historical reinterpretations of his life since his time in the White House. This would allow visitors to better understand how Hoover has been viewed over the course of history and allow them to evaluate their own interpretations of him simultaneously.

A closer examination of Hoover's Presidential Library and its galleries revealed its true purpose of commemorating and celebrating Hoover rather than truly educating the public. The museum shied away from any negative interpretations of the former president as evidenced by their unwillingness to address that Hoover ultimately failed as president. Hoover emerged from his library commemoration for the better, but not the way the museum had intended. He appeared as an idea rather than the relatable man the museum hoped. As the museum modified Hoover to fit their story, tensions between history and the museum's idea of Hoover emerged. As the gallery ended Hoover was no longer the man from Iowa; he was an idea.⁶¹

George Orwell wrote in his book *1984*, "The past is whatever the records and the memories agree upon."⁶² Orwell's quote referred to a fictitious government that sought to manipulate the people's thoughts to dictate their actions. Presidential libraries/museums function in a similar capacity as they seek to tell specific stories that ultimately manipulate what visitors take away from their visits. The Herbert Hoover Presidential Library is no different as their exhibition was created to tell a new story about Hoover and ultimately reshape him in public memory. One museum goer commented on their

⁶¹ Gary Kulik, "Designing the Past," in *History Museums of the United States: A Critical Assessment*, ed. Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 27.

⁶² George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, (London: Secker & Wartburg, 1949), 148.

experience stating, “My wife and I are both 70, so we didn’t have memories of President Hoover. Well, we do now!”⁶³ The man’s testimony encapsulated the purpose of presidential museum exhibitions as accounts “deliberately constructed to do particular work in a particular place, with particular consequences in mind for visitors.”⁶⁴

⁶³ “Learned a lot,” review on HHLP TripAdvisor page, modified February 14, 2017, www.tripadvisor.com.

⁶⁴ Jodi Kanter, *Presidential Libraries as Performance: Curating American Character from Herbert Hoover to George W. Bush*, 5.

CONCLUSION

Interpretations of Herbert Hoover's life have varied based on time and place. Interpretations done by historians have only slightly varied since they began to emerge in the 1960s. Interpretations of the 1980s and 2000s tried to recast Hoover's legacy based on his ideas about individualism and conservatism, rather than the outcome of his presidency or policies he enacted while in office. However, despite historian's best attempts to reinterpret and reinvigorate Hoover, he remained largely forgotten in the public's memory except in his hometown of West Branch where his standing is far different from the rest of the nation.

The hometown of Herbert Hoover has memorialized him within its landscape with the restoration of his birthplace and grounds surrounding it, along with the addition of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum. The restoration of the grounds was started by his family and members of the West Branch community in the 1930s after his presidency had ended, and the presidential library came to fruition in 1962; nearly three decades after he left office. The initiative to restore Hoover's childhood home and grounds was started by his wife and son, but it was backed by the community. Hoover's childhood home and grounds were eventually purchased and restored. The restoration was meant as a memorial to the former President. As the land around his birthplace home was restored, Hoover suggested that a small library be added to the site to house some of his presidential memorabilia. Due to some unforeseen circumstances and rising tensions with administrators, Hoover moved his presidential papers out of storage at Stanford

University and decided to build a presidential library in West Branch on the grounds by his birthplace cottage.

The doors to Hoover's presidential library opened in 1962, and the building was officially dedicated to the National Archives, a federal institution. After Hoover's library was built, presidential libraries grew in size and became more about memorializing their subjects rather than providing access to their papers. As the collection at Hoover's library expanded the building needed to be renovated. The building underwent a series of additions throughout the 1970s and again in the 1980s. With the addition of more storage space in the 1980s came more exhibition space, and the museum's permanent gallery received a complete overhaul.

After the dedication of the Hoover's presidential library in 1962, the birthplace cottage and grounds were turned over to the National Park Service, another federal institution, for care and management, but chose not to reinterpret them, rather they continued to tell the story the town had created. Despite each site's connection to Hoover, the institutions that managed them interpreted them differently. The birthplace and grounds were interpreted using a very local history, that credited Hoover's time in West Branch as the reason for his later successes. The presidential library, interpreted by the national archives, used a much more national history to craft their story. Despite the fact each story was based in history, only the presidential library pulled from academic, historical research to craft its narrative, while the birthplace and grounds pulled from history, its interpretation was crafted using the heritage of West Branch as its base.

The tensions between these two interpretations is evident only to those that know how to read it. The NPS interpretation of the sight was inherited from Hoover's family and members of the West Branch community who wanted to memorialize Hoover. The story that West Branch crafted claimed Hoover as one of their own, but it also became the town's identity in the process. The town took credit for Hoover's life achievements, and as a result their town literally embodied the former President. There is no way of knowing or testing if the story crafted by the people of West Branch, and later interpreted by the NPS, is historically accurate because there simply is no evidence to support or deny it. However, the story told by the National Archives at the presidential library based their story in the historical reinterpretations done by historians throughout the 1980s. The history in Hoover's presidential library museum gallery can be analyzed , but the story that was crafted was designed to exonerate Hoover of his failed presidency and shift the focus to his humanitarian side.

Both historic sites in West Branch speak to different audiences. The birthplace speaks of a local heritage, while the presidential library crafted a historical interpretation based on a national, and sometimes, global scale. Because the presidential library sits on the same grounds as the birthplace cottage, visitors are presented with two different interpretations of Hoover that appear to be two parts to the same story. However, the evident use of heritage by the NPS speaks less about Hoover, and more about how West Branch used Hoover to craft a unique identity for the town itself. The birthplace site and grounds is really not about Hoover at all, but rather the town's use of Hoover's accomplishments to give their constructed identity credibility. The death of Hoover in

1964 brought his memorialization in West Branch full circle. Hoover's life began in the small Iowa town, and it ended there as the former President was laid to rest overlooking his birthplace home, presidential library, and the town of West Branch. The gravesites of Herbert and Lou Henry mark the end of their life story, but also provide visitors with a sense of completion on their tour through his legacy. In the words of Hoover himself, "there is no point in having a memorial telling how a fellow started out without knowing how he finished."⁶⁵ Hoover may have been forgotten in national memory, but he looms large in the identity of the people of West Branch.

⁶⁵ NPS, "The Hoover Houses and Community Structures: Historic Structures Report," *National Park Service*, accessed on May 3, 2017, www.nps.gov.

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